

Community Library Spaces for Promoting Reading for Pleasure in Thailand

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Abstract:

Based on data collected for a PhD research project, Factors Affecting Reading for Pleasure Practices in Community Libraries (CLs) in Thailand, this paper presents one of the themes identified as key to the success of community library initiatives – the provision of an inclusive, safe atmosphere. The research applied a multiple case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, unobtrusive observations, and documentary analysis. The paper discusses the characteristics of CL spaces that are most appropriate for disadvantaged people in the Northeast (Isan), the most deprived area of Thailand. The study showed that CLs provide books access for rural people which greatly encourage literacy development, and community bonding. The evidence suggests that due to discomfort caused by disparities in socio-economic status in Thai society, villagers prefer to use informal CLs rather than the official district public libraries. Analysis of the data showed that four factors contributed to the development of a low anxiety situation for users of CLs: 1) community participation and civic involvement; 2) learning atmosphere and location; 3) sharing reading; and 4) public libraries and the librarians. The research contributes to our knowledge and understanding of community-based reading promotion practices in Thailand and will assist library professionals seeking approaches to increase the reach of libraries in Thailand.

Keywords: Community libraries, Thailand, Reading for pleasure

Introduction

The benefits of reading for pleasure (RfP) are well documented. Research shows that RfP can improve brain function (Berns, Blaine, Prietula & Pye, 2013) and social skills (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Perhaps most importantly for young people, RfP is associated with improved educational attainment (Sullivan and Brown, 2015). The OECD (2010) found RfP more significant for academic success than family socio-economic status, for example. This is particularly important for Thailand where the distribution of educational resources is highly unequal between regions, and between rural and urban areas (Cuesta & Madrigal, 2014). The disparity between the academic performance of urban and rural students is one of the main factors contributing to the low reading attainment for Thailand in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Frederickson, 2016), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Results of PISA 2015

		Science	Mathematics	Reading
	OECD average	493	490	493
1	Singapore	556	564	535
2	Japan	538	532	516
3	Estonia	534	520	519
4	Taiwan	532	542	497
5	Finland	531	511	526
8	Viet Nam	525	495	487
10	China	518	531	494
54	Thailand	421	415	409

(Source: OECD, 2016)

A gap in access to books between lower class and middle class people has persisted for a long time in the country and is likely to be partly to blame for the lower educational attainment of rural students. As noted above, children who read for pleasure generally achieve better educational results but this is predicated on access to sufficient, quality reading material. In Thailand, poorer children, particularly those in rural areas, are at a disadvantage in this regard because their parents/caregivers often cannot afford to buy books and they have little opportunity to do so, given the book distribution system (National Statistical Office, 2016). Community libraries (CLs) could help narrow the gap in book access. Recently in March 2018, the President of the National Book Institute commented that with no state mechanisms to control book prices, “CL is a crucial mechanism for book access [for the majority of Thais], not expensive learning centres in luxury malls [in the city areas] which commoners’ children have no chance to access” (PUBAT, 2018).

This paper explores one of the factors considered important in helping create the conditions in which RfP can flourish in this disadvantaged area of the country: an inclusive, safe atmosphere in CLs in which underprivileged people feel at ease. The data on which the paper is based is drawn from a PhD study - *Factors Affecting Reading for Pleasure Practices in Community Libraries in Thailand* by the first-named author. Analysis of the data found that locally run CLs were successful at creating an informal, friendly atmosphere that encouraged people to use the library for RfP purposes.

Background and context

For the purposes of this study, reading for pleasure (RfP) is defined as, “reading that we do with our free will anticipating the satisfaction that one will get from the act of reading... It typically involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us” (Clark and Rumbold, 2006, p.5). Another term used by the noted reading researcher Stephen Krashen is free voluntary reading (FVR), which he describes as “reading because you want to, self-selected reading for pleasure” (Krashen, 2014).

Krashen emphasised the importance of the accessibility of understandable text in a low-anxiety situation and the omission of accountability (Krashen, 2011). He stressed that in areas with high poverty, libraries could contribute greatly to literacy development by: 1) providing access to books and other materials with great variety; 2) putting minimum censorship on materials; and 3) acquiring light reading materials as well as more demanding books that suit the variety of interests of their readers. In addition, Asselin and Doiron (2013) proposed five effective practices for reading promotion in CLs developed from studying CLs in Africa: 1) choice of reading material; 2) opportunity to read voluntarily and independently; 3) supportive physical and social atmosphere; 4) reading models; and 5) opportunity to share reading, with points 3 and 5 focusing on the development of an appropriate atmosphere. A study of the Thai reading culture by Ngamwittayaphong (2011) similarly highlighted the importance of the affective aspects of reading such as delight, happiness and pride in the promotion of RfP. The need to pay close attention to the sociocultural aspects of reading promotion in CLs have been strongly emphasised in the literature, therefore.

Reading for pleasure is a contested concept in Thailand, however, where educational providers and policies have traditionally emphasised reading for instruction rather than pleasure. Perhaps as a result, studies in Thailand have indicated that although Thai people highly value the ability to read, a lack of reading enjoyment results in Thais reading less than people in Singapore, Vietnam, Japan and Korea (TK Park, 2008; 2010) and this is more pronounced in disadvantaged families, where people cannot afford books (National Statistical Office, 2014; 2016). Makut Ornrudee, a Thai crusader for reading, persistently argues that in the Thai context, reading encouragement cannot fully be the responsibility of the family alone as the majority of Thai families are in poverty. He insists that quality book access via school libraries and CLs is the key to developing a love of reading (Kongrut, 2012).

Stranger-Johannessen (2014, p.93) defined a CL in developing countries as “a library, or a library-like collection and lending service, that is not part of a public library program and is run by one or more people from the community it serves”. These libraries are diverse in nature and are generally established in response to the needs of people in deprived communities (Asselin, & Doiron, 2013; Hog, 2014). Indeed, CLs have usually originated from social movements in marginalised regions, where public library systems have not been effective (Shrestha & Krolak, 2013), which is the case in Thailand. Due to severe problems arising from insufficient budgets and staff, public libraries in Thailand have failed to meet the minimum standards expected of a modern public library service (Sacchanand, Prommaphan & Sacchanand, 2006). In an attempt to extend book access and thus improve poor literacy rates in rural areas, village reading centres/corners were established in 1972. The vast number established by 1999 (35,514) made them one of the most important reading resources for rural people (Cheunwattana, 1999). Most CLs operating in Thailand today originated as village reading centres, and the national reading survey in 2009 (National Statistical Office, 2010) revealed that Thais in both urban and rural areas ranked village/community libraries as one of the top three most effective strategies to encourage reading behaviour.

The study reported here aimed to explore how RfP is being promoted through CLs in the Northeast of Thailand and the factors facilitating or hindering RfP reading promotion practice in these CLs. This paper will focus specifically on one of the sociocultural aspects identified above as important to successful promotion of RfP, that of the provision of library space with an inclusive, safe atmosphere.

Methodology

The research applied a multiple case study design. Data were collected from 8 CLs in the northeast of Thailand also known as Isan, a culturally distinct and economically disadvantaged region. The CLs were selected through both purposive and “reputational case selection” (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 32). The 8 CLs represent four types of case study sites, defined by their establishing bodies; 1) An expert organization; 2) The Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education (ONIE); 3) health promoters; and 4) individuals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, unobtrusive observations, and documentary analysis.

Interview participants were selected for their ability to give access to and experiences of a wide range of RfP activities, and documents. The interviews aimed to gain understanding of the current situation of each CL as regards RfP, and the perspectives of participants on factors that support and hinder RfP in this context. Unobtrusive observation used in the study aimed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the RfP practice in context and included library visits and attendance at library activities. Documentary analysis aimed to analyse documents directly related to RfP practice (e.g. borrowing records, and management policies). In addition, documentary sources, including documents published and posted on websites, were also initially used to provide background information and an understanding of each CL. The data gathered were entered into Nvivo, coded and theoretically categorized. Four case study reports were written, after which cross-case analysis was undertaken. From the cross-case analysis, four themes emerged, one of which - the provision of an inclusive, safe atmosphere - is the focus of this paper.

Findings and Discussions

The findings revealed that CLs play a significant role in providing relaxed, inclusive, safe spaces for children and adults. They are successful in this regard due to a number of characteristics and approaches discussed below.

Community participation and civic involvement

With high book price and inequality in wealth distribution in Thai society, key participants who established CLs, or leaders in RfP, established CLs as a social intervention. This is similar to the situation in Africa where Chisita and Chiparausha (2017, p. 36) identified that CLs were not only established to provide relevant reading material to underprivileged people, but they also had a “sense of social purpose...The primary stimulus is humanitarian, and its outcome is social intervention in support of positive prejudice”.

Findings showed that there was very high community participation during the early period of the establishment of each CL and this created a strong sense of belonging which participants agreed was a factor affecting their sustainability. CLs engaged community members by: 1) supporting and training youth groups to undertake fundraising activities, participate with the interior design of the CLs and lead reading activities in the community; 2) inviting children and users in all age ranges to select books for the CLs; 3) setting up bookshelves in

volunteers' houses to serve community members; 4) establishing picture book gifting projects - Bookstart Projects (BSPs).

The successful establishment of the CLs demonstrated the power of civic involvement and showed that participation in reading activities not only helps individuals achieve personal pleasure and skills but is also a mechanism through which families and communities can connect (Duncan, 2013). When community participation engaged most stakeholders in the community, the whole community used the CLs. In addition, picture book access via BSPs were found to equalise literacy development opportunities for people in a range of physical, social and economic circumstances. In one CL, for example, neighbours and reading volunteers of the local BSP project helped deaf-mute parents ensure their daughter had the opportunity to develop her literacy skills.

Analysis of the case studies also showed that CLs transformed communities by changing villagers' attitude towards reading for young children and book purchasing. Interview participants said that because Thai people generally believe that young children cannot understand language from books, they often ridiculed people who read to young children at home. When CLs introduced BSPs and provided spaces for mothers to read picture books to their young children with their peers, the mothers felt confident and safe from gossip.

When the rural people saw the positive outcomes in young children who had initially been supplied with a few free picture books, they changed their attitudes and were motivated to invest in picture books for their children. This confirmed the assertion of the Head of the Child Development Unit, Ramathibodi Hospital that the BSP in her unit motivated 60-70% of parents to acquire additional picture books, which would not have occurred if the picture books had not been initially provided for free (MGR Online, 2015).

Learning atmosphere and location

All CLs participating in the study were found to provide an inclusive, safe non-judgemental atmosphere for children and people living in the deprived areas in which the study was undertaken. This finding is redolent of the philosophy of the first free public library in North American colonies to provide "safe space for people," not function as the traditional "safe space for things" (Wexelbaum, 2017).

Friendly local staff were mentioned as important elements in CLs, which links with Asselin and Doiron's (2013, p.155) suggestion that "a warm and receptive welcome" by the librarian is a crucial aspect that make people feel safe and that they have freedom in the library. CL services were ideally provided by local people who welcomed users without judgement, for example, children who wear shabby or no clothes in slum areas, and homeless people. They felt comfortable enough to use the CLs in their normal shabby clothes, shorts, and flip flops. It is generally considered inappropriate to wear this kind of casual attire in official venues and libraries in Thailand. In 2016, the case of a lecturer who was barred from entering her university library because of her knee-length shorts showed the rigid library rules which are still strictly practiced in Thailand (Bangkok Post, 2016). A news article reporting the case prompted comments about the library as a holy "closed space" which prevents people from enjoying spending time in learning spaces in Thailand (Ippoodom, 2017). This incident reinforces the study's findings that disadvantaged people were strongly concerned that their attire was not suitable to enter libraries outside their communities.

The library volunteers in the study stressed that a relaxing atmosphere encourages library visits, and helps create community dialogue. When rural villagers feel they are equal, safe and not being judged at CLs, they engage in conversations. A place with no restriction on book access, socialising, and talking is in fact the concept of the library as a 3rd place in civic society (Wexelbaum, 2017). This links with the FVR principle of creating a low anxiety situation (Krashen, 2014) and Asselin and Doiron's (2013) promotion of a supportive physical and social atmosphere.

In terms of location, most CLs studied were not separate buildings but residences, shops or community properties that were at the centre of their communities, easy to access, and providing a physically and psychologically relaxing atmosphere. CL users should be able to sit and read at any time and the traditional seating arrangements, and freedom to relax in the CL space were crucial to encouraging this in most cases. Physically, villagers liked the informal seating arrangement where they could gather to read a daily newspaper and discuss news. Most villagers were happy to sit on the mats or traditional low day beds provided and read.

Sharing reading

Findings showed that group gatherings and the opportunity to share reading brought enjoyment, nurtured individuals' love of reading, and created community bonding. In this regard, the Thai situation is similar to the collective and oral nature of the collective Malaysian society (Pandian, 2011) and African societies (Chisita & Chiparausha, 2017). In all cases, CLs provide both initial opportunities to share reading, and later opportunities to read voluntarily and independently when individuals have developed their reading interests.

Newspapers and magazines with craft sections were popular and greatly supported flat relationship and RfP among the villagers. The people liked to meet up in the CL to discuss the news together after their farming work. In addition, female villagers also liked to do craft together at the CLs. In a city slum area where people still lived in a rural, collective way people went to the CL to share personal stories, give moral support to each other, and use books collectively.

In terms of the oral tradition, some participants commented that music, talking, listening and bedtime stories are associated with RfP in an oral society. Most importantly, these activities link to the affective aspects of reading, a critical element in reading promotion (Ngamwittayaphong, 2011). Several cases revealed how the Isan oral tradition could engage the elderly and children via shared storytelling and writing in oral literature projects in the CLs. Findings revealed that children and adults in the communities liked the handmade craft items produced from these projects, and the handmade picture books created in three CLs. These projects not only contributed to family bonding and literacy development but also cultural inclusiveness and participation. Inclusiveness in the cultural sense is a crucial factor affecting success of CLs. Asselin and Doiron (2013, p.133) found that in CLs around the world handmade materials "are the most meaningful and popular". This is because they support local knowledge, ethnic identity, and language which will establish a strong base and support for individual CL and community development. In addition, Ngamwittayaphong's (2010) study revealed that variety in reading material was more important than quality, and that handmade materials are attractive because they are not perfect and what is not perfect stimulates curiosity and provides more space for multi-dimensional thinking and imagination.

Public libraries and librarians

Most participants referred to public libraries as formal, unfriendly and intimidating for disadvantaged people, confirming that public libraries tend to be a heteronormative space, not an inclusive space (Wexelbaum, 2017). Participants agreed that CLs of any form could extend reading opportunities to disadvantaged people who were reluctant to visit the formal public library because of their intense and complex sense of inferiority, reinforced by them speaking the local Isan language and their informal, shabby clothes. In addition, the view of the librarian's role as a "guardians for books" as reflected by key participants showed that librarians' engagement with the community needs to be revisited. In one area, however, the district public librarian (DPL) worked hard to ensure community access to relevant, quality reading materials and, as a result, the villagers enjoyed books and activities facilitating RfP. The DPL brought new cooking and craft books from the public library to the villages and these were well-received by villagers. She also introduced the villagers to the practice of taking newspaper clippings on topics of interest to the villagers, and brought picture books to support an early literacy project. However, this was an exceptional case and, in addition, the study found that the DPL's job description, and practical cooperation with ONIE sub-district teachers were not clearly defined. Therefore, ONIE CLs were not generally able to access reading materials from the district public libraries.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the understanding of the importance of CL spaces that provide opportunities for marginalised people who usually cannot access quality new books. The sociocultural lenses used in the study revealed that the inclusive, safe atmosphere in CLs primarily created through community participation and civic involvement, changed villagers' attitude towards reading for young children and book purchasing. BSPs which, in the study, needed to start as a collective activity situated within the CLs, contributed to community bonding and, in turn, helped sustain the CL.

The development of an appropriate learning atmosphere, generated by local people who provide a warm and receptive welcome to users is very important for the development of the desirable flat relationships and safe non-judgemental atmosphere, not commonly found in the traditional formal public library service with its strict rules and often intimidating librarians. Sharing reading including collaborative oral literature activities, is the third factor bringing joy, bonding families, helping to promote cultural inclusiveness, and nurturing RfP. The last factor, public libraries and the librarians was found to affect ONIE CLs specifically and suggests that public library and librarians' roles need to be reconsidered.

These factors contribute to better understanding of community reading promotion practices which can radically change literacy practice in the community. CLs that provide an inclusive, safe atmosphere can transform communities and improve individuals' lives by extending opportunities to access a good variety of quality reading materials, relevant to the interests of the people. These are the conditions in which RfP can flourish for the educational and social well-being of everyone, regardless of social position.

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