

B@LSH Project: Creating Ubiquitous Reading Environment for Children in Rural China

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Abstract:

The Project of Books at Rural Libraries, School Book Corners & Home Bookshelves (B@LSH) is a project of reading promotion for children, initiated by the preparatory team of Non-Government Library Association (NGLA) and co-operated by non-government libraries, schools and families in rural China. The B@LSH Project is aimed at creating a ubiquitous reading environment for children in rural areas, so as to reduce the inequality between cities and villages. The B@LSH Project runs as follows: (1) the NGLA team make contact with a rural non-government library and ask the librarian to select a nearby primary school in need of books;(2) the NGLA team donate high-quality children's books and bookshelves to the library and school respectively; (3) after one year's putting into service of school book corners, 10-20 students are selected by the local school and library as outstanding young readers, to each of whom the NGLA team reward the title of "Reading Star" and a small home bookshelf with 20-30 books. Based on seven years' practical experience and field investigation, this paper introduces the overview, operation details, implications and inspirations of the B@LSH Project,

and also discusses how non-government libraries establish dialogues and cooperation with schools and families to create a reading environment for enhancing the reading literacy process of children in rural areas. It is hoped to provide a new way to develop rural children's reading promotion relying on non-government sectors, to identify the role played by non-government libraries in rural cultural construction in developing countries and to explore the new possibility of cooperation between libraries, schools and families.

Keywords: non-government library, reading of children, reading in school, reading at home, rural China

1 Introduction

Having a reading habit in early age is significant to one's adult life. Government sectors in China have not exerted enough attention and support to reading of rural children, providing opportunities for non-government sectors such as non-government libraries to act and make progress.

From a worldwide perspective, individuals or NGOs have promoted the development of developing countries by establishing libraries, which particularly contributed to the cultural development in rural areas. In the case of Bangladesh, many of its 1603 non-government public libraries serve the rural areas by helping villagers maintain their literacy skills and providing reading opportunities for children, such as Gonokendra Pathagar sponsored by Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Islam and Ahmed, 2012). There are also studies on the importance and feasibility of reading programs for rural children. It is stated that the research of rural reading programs should involve administration and planning, reading materials, access to reading materials, reading instruction and activities, assessment of children's reading performance, reading promotion activities, facilities and equipment, roles of library staff and volunteers, political supports, role of teachers and parents (Henri, Warning and Angel, 2008). In China, NGOs such as non-government libraries and foundations also play an important role in reading of rural children. A national survey in 2011 found that there were more than 20,000 non-government libraries built by 51 NGOs, with nearly 300-million-yuan investment, more than 10 million donated books and nearly 20,000 volunteers, improving the reading conditions for children (Qiu and Wang, 2011). However, the number of reading projects for rural children is growing while relevant studies are very few.

This paper introduces the Project of Books at Rural Libraries, School Book Corners & Home Bookshelves (B@LSH), a typical case of mobilizing non-government sectors to create a ubiquitous reading environment for rural children. Hereby, "Rural Libraries" refers to free and open non-government libraries founded by local villagers, "School Book Corners" refers to the shared bookshelves set up in the classrooms of rural schools, and "Home Bookshelves" refers to the shared bookshelves set up in the villagers' houses. The project, initiated by the preparatory team of Non-Government Library Association (NGLA), is aimed at creating dialogues among non-government libraries, schools and families within rural communities to set up a reading ecosystem for local children. The authors are members of the NGLA team, who launched the B@LSH Project in 2012 and accumulate plenty of first-hand materials in practice. Some previous papers of field research have been published on academic journals and those papers also compiled into a monograph published in 2019. This paper describes the overview, operation details, implications and inspirations of the B@LSH Project, and also discusses how non-government libraries cooperate with schools and families to create a reading environment for enhancing reading literacy of children in rural areas. The purpose of this paper is not only to describe the situation of children's reading in rural areas, but also to

provide a new way to develop rural children's reading promotion relying on non-government sectors.

2 Overview of the project

The B@LSH Project was initiated in 2012, whose goal is to assist and improve the local non-government libraries to build and run book shelves in local primary schools and villagers' houses, so as to create a better reading environment for students, teachers and parents in rural areas, especially for the left-behind children.

The NGLA team, sponsor of this project, is a non-profit organization dedicated to developing non-government libraries. The team members consist of academic experts from universities, a retired librarian from National Library of China, a director from a non-profit organization, and librarians from non-government libraries. The B@LSH Project involves non-government libraries, primary schools and villagers' families in rural China, with the librarians of the local non-government libraries playing the central and leading roles of the project (Figure 1).

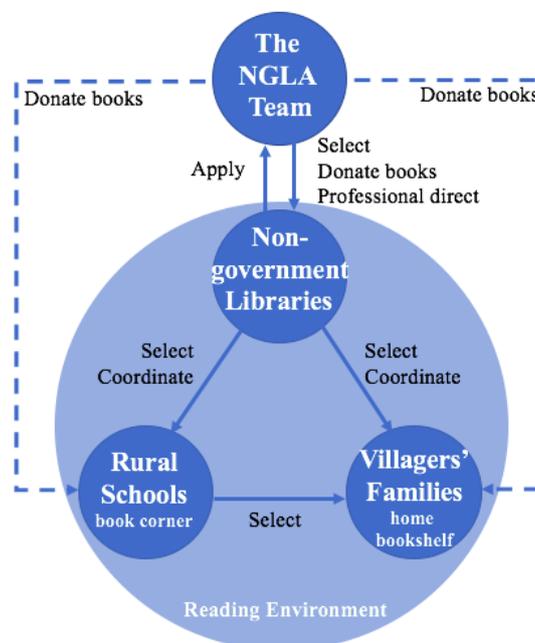


Figure 1. The relationship among the participants of B@LSH Project

The operation cycle of B@LSH Project is two years, which is divided into three stages:

In Stage One, the NGLA team contact with a rural non-government library in a certain place, and then the librarian of library selects a nearby school in need of books. The selected areas are usually located in the state-designated poverty-stricken counties, and the selected schools are primary schools with large proportion of left-behind children.

In Stage Two, the NGLA team donate high-quality children's books and bookshelves to the rural non-government library and rural school respectively. Each class of the primary school receives 100 books and 1 bookshelf to establish its own book corner. Those donated books are newly purchased rather than recyclables from the city.

In Stage Three, after one year's putting into service of school book corners, 10-20 students are selected by the local primary school and library as outstanding young readers, to each of

whom the NGLA team reward the title of “Reading Star” and a small home bookshelf with 20-30 books. Those books at home are expected to share with peers and neighbours.

Consequently, the rural non-government libraries, rural schools and villagers’ families join together to form an interactive reading system that offers the rural children easier access to knowledge and more opportunities to create dialogues among peers and generations.

3 Operation of the project

Fundraising

The average expenditure for operating the B@LSH Project in one village is about 20,000 yuan. The NGLA team is responsible for fundraising for the project. Since formed in June 2012, the NGLA team has maintained good cooperative relations with Xin Ping Foundation, Evergreen Education Foundation, and the preparatory team of Innovation and Development Association of Small and Micro Enterprise in China, etc. In addition, the NGLA team keep developing new relations with associations of entrepreneurs in different areas, mobilizing businessmen to fund their local non-government libraries and schools. The funds raised are mainly used to purchase new books and bookshelves for rural children.

Selecting project sites

There are two ways to select a suitable site for the B@LSH Project, including self-application from rural non-governmental libraries and fieldwork from the NGLA team. The selected rural non-governmental libraries usually fit in two conditions: (1) the librarian himself has a willing to serve public welfare and a good local interpersonal network that ensures him to find a suitable school as a project site for establishing book corners; (2) the library itself is free and open to the villagers, making difference in the rural community. The rural schools selected by the NGLA team should either have a small library with old and undesirable books for children or have no library at all.

The rural non-government library listed as a project site should submit a formal application to the NGLA team for evaluation and determination. The last step of selection work is signing a tripartite cooperative agreement. This agreement stipulates the rights and obligations of the NGLA team, the non-government library and the primary school.

Selecting and allocating books

The NGLA team select and allocate books according to the specific information provided by a certain non-government library and its related school. The specific information includes the number of children's books needed by the library, the number of grades and classes of each grade in the school, the number of students in each class, etc. Normally, the NGLA team will sponsor 500-600 books to a rural non-government library, and 100 books for a book corner to each class in a rural school. If the number of students in the class is less than 30 then 80 books will be funded while if exceeds 40 then 120 books, basically ensuring every student 3-4 books to read.

When it comes to the content of books, the NGLA team adopt a principle of “Six Haves” (books have love, fun, stories, dreams, creation, and enlightenment) to ensure that selected books are desirable by rural children. Besides, books of different content are allocated to different grades and different classes within a same grade to ensure that students can read books suitable to their ages.

In order to ensure the stable source and reliable quality of books, the NGLA team has established a long-term and close cooperative relationship with a book procurement platform run by a NGO. The book platform is non-profit and specialized in services of bibliographies, acquisition of books, allocation of library collection and logistics. When receiving the specific requirements from the NGLA team, the book platform will propose a book list with price. When the book list is confirmed by the NGLA team, the book platform will arrange the purchase, package and logistics of books for the rural libraries and schools.

Return visiting

After one year's operation of the B@LSH Project, the NGLA team will pay a return visit to the selected rural non-government libraries and rural schools for three purposes:

First, the NGLA team can get a better understanding of practical operation and make an evaluation of the project. There is a designed form for evaluating the project, including indicators of the establishment of book corners, the organization of reading activities, the improvement of children's reading ability and the reflections from teachers and parents, etc. The information gathered from a return visit helps to adjust the practice in time and also plays a role in supervising the project.

Second, the NGLA team can exchanged ideas by collective discussions and individual interviews with the librarian, principals and teachers of primary schools, as well as children and their parents. The exchanged ideas include the overview of the B@LSH Project, the importance of cultivating children's reading habits, and the methods of organizing reading activities. Since the project has already achieved positive effects, the communication can promote the high recognition and mutual understanding of all parties involved in the project, and enable the exchanged ideas to be effectively implemented.

Third, the NGLA team reward 10-20 selected outstanding young readers as "Reading Star" and sponsor each of them a family bookshelf with 20-30 new books. The criteria for choosing "Reading Star" is: (1) the student comes from a relatively poor family and he/she has made some progress in intelligence during the running year of the project; (2) the student promises to share the books on the family bookshelf with his/her classmates, neighbours, relatives and friends.

4 Accomplishment and implications of the project

From 2012 to 2018, the NGLA team have established partnerships with 10 rural libraries and 11 rural schools in different areas of China (Table 1) and rewarded 127 outstanding young readers from rural families with a small home bookshelf for each one (Table 2). The B@LSH Project has donated 11,035 books, 270 bookshelves in total, adding up to 64,117.26 yuan, directly benefiting 3,401 students and 211 teachers. Due to effects of multi-subject collaborative project with the NGLA team, non-government libraries, schools, parents and children, the ubiquitous reading environment has been formed in villages that helps to cultivate an increasing number of outstanding young readers and to create "Literary School" and "Literary Family" in rural China.

Table 1. Rural non-government libraries and schools participated in the project

No.	Non-government libraries	Schools	Villages
1	Xin Lian Xin Library	Matian Primary School	Shang Matian Village, Shanxi
2	Villagers' Library	Dishui Primary School	Limin Village, Hunan
3	Liu Tuchi Library	Sanlian Primary School	Chuanshan District, Sichuan
4	Zhao Liangbi Library	Mingde Primary School	Qujiang Village, Hebei
5	Chenglin Cultural&Sport Library	Zhengxin Primary School	Cangwan Village, Ningxia
6	Red Wolfberry Library	Gaiwan Primary School	Gaiwan Village, Ningxia
7	Jian Jiang Library	Weirong Primary School	Weirong Village, Guangxi
8	ZhaoYanliang Library	Ningzhuang Primary School	Ningzhuang Village, Henan
9	San You Yuan Library	Zhongmin Primary School	Ningdu County, Jiangxi
10	Chuanwen Library	Wuyi Primary School	Wuyi Village, Shanxi
11	Chuanwen Library	Yanping Primary School	Yanping Village, Shanxi

Table 2. Conditions of reward home bookshelves for outstanding young readers

No.	Rural School	Outstanding Young Reader	Reward Books	Benefited Population
1	Matian Primary School	14	280	700
2	Dishui Primary School	10	320	500
3	Sanlian Primary School	10	200	500
4	Mingde Primary School	10	200	500
5	Zhengxin Primary School	10	201	500
6	Gaiwan Primary School	12	184	600
7	Weirong Primary School	10	200	500
8	Ningzhuang Primary School	10	300	500
9	Zhongmin Primary School	15	450	750
10	Wuyi Primary School	14	420	700
11	Yanping Primary School	12	360	600
Total		127	3115	6350

Rural families in the project

In interviewed rural families, it was founded that the effectiveness of reading occurred simultaneously on children and parents. On one hand, reading at home enriched children's after-school life. Their literacy and general knowledge have been significantly enhanced. For example, a third-grade student said: "I was always worrying about writing in the past, nowadays reading expands my vocabulary and level of composition." Reading has also become the spiritual pillar of many left-behind children. On the other hand, the home bookshelf has also inspired many parents to read. A 43-year-old mother said that the home bookshelf delivers a better temper for her and incorrect ways to educate children.

So-called “Literary families” are emerging in the villages (Figure 2). The scene of a literary family was shown as following: a small blue bookshelf is placed in the cleanest and brightest place of the house; a younger child is reading a picture book with mom; an elder child is reading independently instead of watching TV; and grandpa is having fun with a book titled *Five Thousand Years of Chinese History*. The home bookshelf in daily life is not only creating a stronger reading atmosphere but also enhancing family members’ mental attitude.



Figure 2. Grandpa Liu reading with together his two granddaughters (Home Bookshelf in Hebei Province)

Rural schools in the project

In interviewed rural schools, the school book corners turned out to be popular with students and teachers, activating rural primary schools to develop reading activities. For one thing, because the donated books meet the need of different grade levels, children are more likely to get books that they love. Teachers can also find suitable materials when they teach reading courses and carry out reading activities. Reading has been incorporated into the education system to help develop a literary school for students.

For another, the school book corner is an activation of the original school library (or a book room). Rural schools often have a library in accordance with the regulations and requirements of the Ministry of Education. However, the original school library normally has two problems: (1) Books are old or the content is not suitable for children;(2) School libraries are always unattended and barely open to students. Meanwhile, book corners established in the B@LSH Project are placed in the classroom, so that students can access to books at any time and even take books home (Figure 3). In this way, the project changes the stereotype of school libraries, increasing the effectiveness of reading promotion.



Figure 3. A book corner in the classroom of Grade 3 in Ningzhuang Primary School (School Book Corner Project in Henan Province)

Rural libraries in the project

In interviewed rural libraries, conditions of the library appeared to be improved by receiving high-quality books and professional guidance from the NGLA team. Most rural non-government libraries used to be trapped with undesirable books. Instead of used books or disposed books, the NGLA team donated new books with suitable content such as books on agriculture or health care for adults and books on fairy tales for children. Villagers are now more willing to visit the non-government libraries in their leisure time, as recorded on the daily registry of the library.

The librarian of rural non-government libraries was encouraged to carry out various reading activities, such as reading clubs, parent-child activities, calligraphy training and quiz programs (Figure 4). These activities were usually conducted at 3:30 p.m. and the non-government library not only provided a place for children to learn and read after school, but also served as child custody. Therefore, the non-government libraries were called “school at 3:30” by parents in local communities.

Besides, many librarians of rural non-government libraries have gained and strengthened their ability to participate in public projects after during the process of the B@LSH Project. Librarians learned how to apply for a project, manage the budget, communicate with other sectors and evaluate a project, which would help them to participate in culture project from government and other foundations. In other words, the B@LSH Project has stimulated the self-development vitality of rural non-government libraries to achieve their own sustainable development.



Figure 4. The librarian guiding rural children to read in Chuanwen Library (A rural non-government library in Shanxi Province)

Rural communities in the project

In interviewed rural communities, it can be seen that reading activities are infiltrating the public and private space of rural communities, since the B@LSH Project has integrated the community space (rural non-government libraries), learning space (rural schools) and living space (rural families) into a reading system. The project has not only promoted the development of rural culture, but also rebuilt the spiritual outlook of the entire rural community. Nowadays positive changes have happened in rural communities: villagers are paying more and more attention to cultural issues; the neighbourhoods are increasingly courteous and harmonious; and the roads of villages are neat and tidy.

5 Discussion and conclusion

After seven years of operation, some understanding of the B@LSH Project has been summarized as follows:

Localization is the key to the success of the project

Whether the B@LSH Project can settle down in rural China depends on two factors: (1) there is a non-government library in local community, and the librarian is educated and willing to serve the public welfare; (2) there is a local primary school that needs to improve its reading environment, with a principal agreeing with the idea of project and being cooperative in the implementation of the project.

As an outside sponsor of the project, the NGLA team can neither have sufficient information of the rural environment and rural children's reading needs nor enough time and energy to participate in the whole process of the project. Therefore, the B@LSH Project has to rely on local individuals and sectors. The librarian of a non-government library is the cultural elite of the rural community and the principal of a primary school is the helmsman of the elementary education in rural areas. They are directly involved in the resource allocation and utilization of the project.

Children need appropriate reading materials

The selection and allocation of books for the B@LSH Project adhere to a principle of appropriateness, which is derived from the needs of rural children. A primary school teacher said in the interview that when the school book corner was placed with the books donated by the NGLA team, the children cried out, "We have new books to read! Finally!" Behind this reaction lies the fact that books donated to rural areas are not always new and welcomed,

some of them come from the old stacks of publishing houses or the used books collected from urban areas by NGOs. Like books in some school libraries, these books are outdated or not suitable for children to read.

In addition, even the newly published first-hand books are not always “appropriate” for children, with the problems such as diversified types and large differences in content. Therefore, rural children are provided with various types of books as far as possible in the B@LSH Project, such as flip books and pop-up books that can stimulate children's imagination and curiosity. In a return visit, we saw that a pop-up book could immediately attract the attention of a group of children.

Children need designed reading environment

In order to stir up the reading interest of rural children, a sort of “soft environment” for reading needs to be created, which refers to designing reading space, reading activities, etc. In many non-government libraries, the librarians used local resources to set up reading activities. Some parents from families with small home bookshelves also spontaneously organized reading activities, providing opportunities for parents and children sharing their reading experience. These reading activities are not available in school classrooms, not to mention in school libraries. Thus, a school in library is more important than a library in school.

“A School in library” refers to the cultural spaces for reading activities based on books, which can be built in the rural non-government libraries, in school classrooms, in families, and even under a big tree standing at the village entrance. Those reading activities are characterized by diverse themes, strong experience, deep participation and inclusiveness. Based on years of practice, the NGLA team believe that libraries should activate books on shelves by reading activities. Only by the intangible influence of reading activities that centre on rural libraries and involve primary schools and families, can we build a real ubiquitous reading environment and a lively rural reading community on the basis of limited book coverage.

Post-service is the guarantee for the sustainable development of the project

For the sustainable development of the B@LSH Project, follow-up support for local non-government libraries, rural primary schools and villagers’ families is necessary after the distribution of books. The post-service of the project is divided into two phases:

First, the NGLA team provide professional guidance during the return visit after one year’s operation. For example, in a return visit to Wuyi Primary School in Shanxi (Table 1, No.10), the NGLA team suggested that young readers should be trained to self-manage the book corners, especially the senior students; teachers should use the morning self-study time or set up a special course to carry out manual reading classes in a planned way; the principal should lead to organize reading activities and to transform the school space into a kind of environment of “Literary School” by ways such as setting corridor book bags, staircase book bars.

Second, the NGLA team establish long-term cooperative relations with the school by rewarding the school as “Reading Base of Cultural Flam” and providing learning and training opportunities for librarians, teachers and students. For example, the NGLA team sponsored a number of rural teachers and librarians to attend “Reading and Writing Camp” in 2017 and organized a rural primary school reading summer camp in Xiaobu Primary and Secondary School for students in July 2016.

Reading at home is the fulcrum for reading promotion in rural areas

The B@LSH Project develops its last link by rewarding the outstanding young readers and extending reading at school to reading at home. Unexpectedly, the home bookshelves have made difference in rural children's living space. When reading step into families, it not only helps to broaden children's knowledge, but also works as a medium for emotional communication that can improve the intergenerational relationship of rural families and the neighbourly relationship of rural communities.

On one hand, the small home bookshelf promotes a close communication between children and their parents within the family. Books enrich the inner world of the left-behind rural children, to some extent compensate the regrets of parents not being around. On the other hand, every small home bookshelf plays a role of external radiation. The young owners of the small bookshelf lend and share books to their classmates, relatives, neighbours and friends, and then they exchange and discuss their reading experience. This process can have a benign effect on interpersonal communication in rural society.

The good effects of the home bookshelves inspired the NGLA team, initiating another new project called "Household Reading Sites in Villages" (HRSV). The first one was set up in Shandong in 2013. In this project, the librarian of a non-government library selects a number of families to establish cooperative relationships and the NGLA team sponsor 100 books and 1 small bookshelf to each selected family to make it a satellite station of the rural library. The NGLA team have funded this project in four rural areas by 2018. When multiple reading families forming into a collection, their external effects that can be exerted will be greater, so that a reading family will drive the neighbourhood to read and create a reading atmosphere within the village. In this sense, we can create a "Literary Village" by gradually building a number of literary families.

Conclusion

There are still problems in the B@LSH Project for further study. Two main problems are: First, the NGLA team have not found suitable methods and tools for objective and effective evaluation of the project, the Rural Participation Assessment (PRA) can be a good direction. Second, the project's funding sources are unstable. With limited and unscheduled donations, it is difficult for the B@LSH Project to expand continuously and systematically.

This paper gives a general introduction to the B@LSH Project, hoping to contribute an approach of reading promotion. This approach attempts to establish partnerships among libraries, schools and families to shape the ubiquitous reading environment for children in rural China. When adopting this approach to other areas, practitioners need to conduct local research to explore ways to create a children's reading promotion network suitable for the local environment and needs.

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