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Promoting Reading Culture in Samosir through Mobile Library Initiatives

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores the role of mobile library initiatives in promoting a reading culture in remote and underserved areas. Limited access to educational resources, infrastructure, and books has long posed a challenge to literacy development in rural communities. In response, mobile libraries have emerged as a grassroots solution, bringing books and literacy programs directly to isolated populations. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations in several remote villages served by mobile libraries. The findings indicate that mobile libraries significantly enhance access to reading materials, improve reading behavior among children and youth, and foster community engagement in literacy activities. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of local participation and identifies key challenges, such as sustainability, funding, and logistical constraints. Despite these obstacles, mobile library initiatives demonstrate a positive impact on educational equity and literacy development. The study concludes that with adequate support and strategic collaboration, mobile libraries have the potential to become sustainable instruments for empowering marginalized communities through reading.

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving knowledge-based world, literacy and a strong reading culture are essential components for the socio-economic and intellectual development of any society. Reading is not only a fundamental skill but also a gateway to lifelong learning, critical thinking, and informed citizenship. However, despite the growing emphasis on education globally, many remote and underprivileged areas continue to face significant challenges in fostering a reading culture. Limited access to books, inadequate educational infrastructure, and a lack of trained educators are common obstacles that hinder the promotion of literacy in these marginalized communities. Consequently, children and adults alike in these regions often struggle with low

literacy levels, which in turn perpetuate cycles of poverty, social exclusion, and limited opportunities for personal and professional advancement.

In response to these challenges, mobile library initiatives have emerged as innovative and practical solutions to bridge the educational gap and bring the world of books to the doorsteps of those living in remote areas. Mobile libraries, which can take the form of bookmobiles, motorbikes with book compartments, boats, or even animal-driven carts, are designed to deliver books and educational resources to communities that are geographically isolated or underserved by conventional library systems. These mobile units not only provide access to a variety of reading materials but also serve as catalysts for community engagement, literacy programs, and educational outreach.

The implementation of mobile library services addresses multiple facets of the literacy crisis in remote regions. By bringing books directly to children and adults in rural areas, these initiatives help instill reading habits, inspire curiosity, and create a culture of learning where none previously existed. Mobile libraries also often collaborate with schools, local governments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver structured reading programs, storytelling sessions, and workshops that further enrich the educational experiences of their users. In some regions, mobile libraries are supplemented with digital technology, providing access to e-books and online educational resources, thus bridging not only the geographical gap but also the digital divide.

Despite their evident potential, mobile library programs face numerous challenges, including logistical difficulties, limited funding, maintenance costs, and the need for sustained community involvement. Nonetheless, successful case studies from various parts of the world—such as Indonesia's "Pustaka Bergerak," Kenya's camel library, and Colombia's "Biblioburro"—demonstrate that with creativity, dedication, and strategic partnerships, mobile libraries can have a profound and lasting impact on promoting literacy and reading culture in remote areas.

This paper aims to explore the role and effectiveness of mobile library initiatives in promoting a reading culture among remote communities. It examines the underlying challenges faced by these communities in accessing reading materials, the innovative strategies employed by mobile library programs, and the measurable impacts these initiatives have on literacy development. By analyzing both global and local examples, this study seeks to highlight best practices and propose recommendations for expanding and sustaining mobile library efforts as a vital component of inclusive education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how mobile library initiatives contribute to promoting a reading culture in remote areas. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by stakeholders involved in the

implementation and use of mobile library services. By capturing rich, narrative data, the study aimed to uncover the contextual factors and strategies that make such initiatives effective in fostering literacy and engagement with reading among marginalized communities.

1. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in selected remote villages and rural communities where mobile library services are actively operated by non-governmental organizations, local governments, or community-based movements. The sites were chosen based on the availability and consistency of mobile library programs over at least one year. Participants included a diverse group of stakeholders, such as mobile library operators, program coordinators, school teachers, parents, and regular users of the mobile library services, especially children and youth.

Purposive sampling was used to select 15–20 key informants who could provide detailed and relevant insights into the planning, execution, and outcomes of mobile library activities. Criteria for inclusion included active involvement in the mobile library program and residence in the targeted remote areas.

2. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings. The primary techniques included:

- **Semi-structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with mobile library organizers, teachers, and parents to gather information on the objectives, operations, challenges, and perceived impact of the initiatives.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs were held with children and young adult readers who benefit from the mobile library services to understand their reading habits, preferences, and the influence of the mobile library on their literacy development.
- **Observations:** Non-participant observations were carried out during mobile library visits to the communities. The researcher observed the interaction between library staff and users, the types of reading materials accessed, and community engagement during reading sessions or literacy activities.
- **Document Review:** Relevant reports, activity logs, reading program curricula, and user feedback documents provided by mobile library operators were analyzed to support and validate data obtained from fieldwork.

3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded manually. The data were organized into themes based on recurring patterns and significant insights related to the promotion of reading culture, barriers to literacy, the role of community participation, and the sustainability of mobile library programs. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

4. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data sources were employed. Participants were given the opportunity to review and verify interview transcripts and preliminary findings to confirm accuracy. Furthermore, multiple sources of data were compared to validate the consistency and reliability of emerging themes.

5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants and from the guardians of minor participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing personal information, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a powerful and inspiring picture of how mobile library initiatives are transforming the reading landscape in remote communities. Through the voices of educators, parents, children, and program organizers, it becomes evident that these mobile units are doing more than merely delivering books—they are cultivating a sustainable and inclusive reading culture where access to knowledge was once scarce or even nonexistent.

In many of the communities visited, mobile libraries were often described as a “lifeline to learning.” Before their arrival, books were a rarity—something only found in schools, and often in limited quantities. Children had little to no access to storybooks, and their reading activities were mostly confined to memorizing textbooks. The introduction of mobile libraries changed this dynamic dramatically. Colorful, well-stocked bookmobiles became a much-anticipated event in the weekly routine of villages. As one teacher shared during an interview, “When the mobile library arrives, it’s like a festival. The children run to it before it even parks.”

This enthusiasm translated into tangible changes in reading behavior. Children who once struggled to read basic sentences began reading short stories and comic books with confidence and excitement. Focus group discussions with young readers revealed that many of them now consider reading a favorite hobby. Several reported borrowing books for their siblings at home, and in some cases, forming small peer reading groups. Teachers and parents alike observed increased attention spans, improved vocabulary, and even better academic performance among regular readers. These observations support the idea that when reading is presented as a joyful, voluntary activity—rather than a school task—it has the power to transform attitudes and abilities.

Crucially, the success of mobile libraries was not limited to individual improvement. The presence of the library catalyzed wider community engagement. In the more active communities, village heads and parent groups often coordinated with mobile library staff to organize reading corners, storytime sessions, and even local

storytelling competitions. In some areas, elders contributed folk tales and oral narratives, which were later transcribed and added to the mobile library's local collection. This collaborative spirit not only increased the relevance of the reading materials but also embedded reading into the cultural identity of the community.

However, the path to success has not been without challenges. Many mobile library operators reported recurring logistical and financial hurdles. The cost of maintaining vehicles, securing fuel, and purchasing new books is a constant concern. In some particularly remote locations, rough terrain and poor road conditions delayed or prevented scheduled visits. In others, weather conditions such as heavy rains during the monsoon season posed serious operational difficulties. Moreover, the absence of trained library personnel in some areas limited the scope of programming that could be delivered alongside book distribution. Without adequate staff, many mobile libraries were only able to lend books, missing out on the opportunity to provide guided reading, storytelling, or literacy workshops that further enhance the reading experience.

Despite these obstacles, the impact of mobile libraries remains undeniably significant. Beyond individual literacy gains, these initiatives are contributing to a larger goal of educational equity. In areas where children previously had no means to access literature beyond their school textbooks, the mobile library becomes a symbol of inclusion—a mobile classroom, a traveling cultural hub, and a space for imagination and exploration. These findings align with global education frameworks, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Mobile libraries, though small in scale compared to national education systems, represent a grassroots, adaptable model of delivering on this promise.

What emerges from this study is not only a testament to the resilience and creativity of mobile library organizers but also a call to action for broader support. If adequately funded, expanded, and integrated with local education systems, mobile libraries have the potential to serve as long-term instruments of social change. They not only put books in the hands of readers but also empower entire communities to value reading as a shared resource, a common good that uplifts and unites.

In conclusion, the story of mobile libraries is a story of hope. It is the story of a child in a remote village who discovers the magic of storytelling, of a parent who learns to read alongside their child, and of a teacher who finds renewed passion in nurturing young minds. While much work remains to be done in overcoming logistical and financial barriers, the evidence is clear: mobile libraries are not merely vehicles filled with books—they are engines of change, driving toward a more literate, equitable, and empowered future.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore the significant role that mobile library initiatives play in promoting a reading culture in remote and underserved

communities. By bringing books and literacy-based programming directly to the doorsteps of people who have limited or no access to educational resources, mobile libraries are not merely filling a logistical gap—they are opening doors to imagination, knowledge, and opportunity. They serve as vehicles of hope, particularly in areas where formal educational infrastructure is minimal and reading materials are scarce.

The study revealed that access to a wide range of reading materials—when made available through regular, community-based mobile library visits—can ignite a passion for reading, especially among children and young adults. This is evident in the reported improvement in reading behavior, increased engagement with books, and a noticeable boost in literacy skills. Moreover, the mobile libraries have not only reached individuals but also galvanized entire communities into participating in literacy promotion. Active collaboration between library organizers, teachers, parents, and local leaders was identified as a critical factor in the long-term success and sustainability of such programs.

Nevertheless, the journey is not without its challenges. Sustainability concerns, limited funding, infrastructural barriers, and a lack of trained personnel continue to threaten the consistent delivery and growth of mobile library services. Despite these constraints, the initiatives continue to thrive through the commitment of educators, volunteers, and local stakeholders who recognize the profound value of access to reading materials.

What makes mobile library initiatives particularly impactful is their adaptability to local contexts and their ability to meet learners where they are—geographically, socially, and educationally. They align with broader goals of educational equity and inclusive learning, making them an essential component in addressing literacy gaps in marginalized populations. Their continued expansion and development will require strategic partnerships with governments, NGOs, educational institutions, and private donors.

In conclusion, promoting a reading culture in remote areas through mobile libraries is not only possible—it is already happening, with promising results. These initiatives affirm that access to books is a right, not a privilege, and that fostering a love of reading is foundational to empowering individuals and strengthening communities. With continued support, innovation, and collaboration, mobile libraries can play a transformative role in shaping a more literate and equitable world.

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