

Postprint: Empirical Research and Strategic Recommendations on Grassroots Library Services for Rural Children's Reading in Impoverished Areas

Authors: Wu Jianhua, Zhang Xiaoyu

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Delving into village libraries in impoverished areas to conduct experimental research on reading services for rural children facilitates the identification of effective strategies for promoting grassroots library construction. [Methods/Process] The researcher, serving as a volunteer during winter vacation, provided homework tutoring and conducted a series of reading activities for primary and secondary school students returning home for the Spring Festival in a village library of a nationally-designated impoverished county. [Results/Conclusions] Volunteer intervention can effectively activate grassroots service points. It is recommended that grassroots libraries in impoverished areas: adapt measures to local conditions to construct a grassroots library reading service system, focusing on the professional construction, management, and operation of township branch libraries, and introduce professional talent to guide reading services across the county; establish relatively independent reading spaces to facilitate management and operation; equip village libraries with reading resources that meet the needs of rural children; organize university students to serve as reading service volunteers at township branch libraries and village libraries during winter and summer vacations.

Full Text

Preamble

Practice Research and Strategic Suggestions on Rural Children's Reading Services in Grassroots Libraries of Poverty-Stricken Areas

Wu Jianhua, Zhang Xiaoyu School of Information Management, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079

Abstract: *[Purpose/Significance]* Conducting experimental research on reading services for rural children in village libraries of poverty-stricken areas helps identify effective strategies for promoting grassroots library construction. *[Method/Process]* The researchers, serving as volunteers, used the winter vacation to provide homework guidance and a series of reading activities for primary and secondary school students returning home for the Spring Festival in a village library of a nationally designated poverty-stricken county. *[Result/Conclusion]* Volunteer intervention can effectively activate grassroots service points. It is recommended that grassroots libraries in poverty-stricken areas: (1) build reading service systems according to local conditions, focusing on the professional construction, management, and operation of township branches, and introduce professional talents to guide county-wide reading services; (2) establish relatively independent reading spaces to facilitate management and operation; (3) equip village libraries with reading resources that meet the needs of rural children; and (4) organize university students to serve as reading service volunteers in township branches and village libraries during winter and summer vacations.

Keywords: poverty-stricken areas; grassroots libraries; rural children's reading services; reading promotion; professional reading service talents

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The “Rural Revitalization Strategic Plan (2018-2022)” issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council clearly states that “the contradiction between the people’s growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development is most prominent in rural areas,” and that promoting universal reading into families and rural areas to improve farmers’ scientific and cultural literacy is an important component of the rural revitalization strategy [1]. The 18th National Survey on National Reading found that the urban-rural gap remains significant: in 2020, the book reading rates for urban and rural residents in China were 68.3% and 49.9% respectively, with average annual reading volumes of 5.54 and 3.75 books per person [2].

Children constitute an important component of the rural population. Promoting reading among rural children is an effective path to narrowing the urban-rural education gap and promoting educational equity [3], and plays a crucial role in enhancing rural cultural literacy, reserving human resources, and achieving cultural revitalization [4]. By 2015, China’s rural children reached 138 million, accounting for 50.9% of the total child population, with children in poverty-stricken rural areas comprising 32.0% of the rural child population [5]. The “China Children’s Development Outline (2011-2020)” proposed creating conditions for rural children to read books, widely carrying out book reading activities, and encouraging and guiding children to read [6].

The Public Library Law requires establishing a main-branch library system with county public libraries as the main library and township (street) comprehensive

cultural stations and village (community) libraries as grassroots service points, to promote the extension of public library services to urban and rural grassroots levels [7]. Township comprehensive cultural stations and village libraries are the public library facilities closest to rural children. How to leverage their location advantages and integrate rural children, especially those in poverty-stricken areas, into reading promotion services has become an important research question.

2. Research Status on Rural Children's Reading in Poverty-Stricken Areas

Jin Wugang's systematic study of public reading service systems in poverty-stricken areas found that the vast majority of China's poverty-stricken areas are located in rural regions [8]. Therefore, this study focuses on examining research on rural children's reading in poverty-stricken areas, revealing that relevant literature is quite limited. Developed countries and regions emphasize studying how to help children in remote rural areas benefit from reading through reading activities [9-10]. Both domestic and international surveys indicate that rural children have narrow reading channels and scarce reading resources, primarily obtained from friends, family, and bookstores, with local libraries being a less common source [11-12]. Due to the lack of professional reading guidance, rural children's reading structure is unreasonable, with extracurricular books mainly consisting of supplementary teaching materials and composition guides. They generally lack reading skills training and have relatively low reading proficiency [13-14].

For left-behind children in poverty-stricken areas, their reading environment is very unsatisfactory due to their distance from towns [15]. For rural children who move to cities with their parents, the randomness of service provision in their residential areas makes it difficult for them to obtain long-term stable reading services [16]. Boarding school significantly reduces the reading performance of rural children in poverty-stricken areas [17]. Provincial and municipal libraries are making efforts to help rural children. For example, Meizhou Jianying Library cooperates with township kindergartens to carry out reading promotion activities benefiting rural children in poverty-stricken areas [18]. Guizhou Library implements the "New Book House" project, establishing libraries in migrant worker schools and rural schools, and regularly conducts reading activities for children in poverty-stricken areas [19]. However, these services from outside the grassroots library system lack sustainability and universal coverage. How to build a county-level grassroots library reading service system suitable for conditions in poverty-stricken areas to ensure continuous, stable, and standardized reading services for rural children has become an important unresolved issue.

The lack of full-time management personnel is the main reason for the absence of daily reading services at grassroots service points [20-21], a problem that is more prominent in poverty-stricken areas. Although Hainan Province has achieved "full coverage of county, township, and village-level public cultural service networks," this "government-led rural public cultural service facility construction

project has not achieved the expected results in terms of utilization.” Grassroots service points in poverty-stricken areas still lack reading resources, full-time management personnel, and professional service staff, and cannot operate normally [22]. Luotian County Library in Hubei Province was rated as a first-class library as early as 2013 and has established a three-tier service network of “county library as the main library, township libraries as branch libraries, and village book houses as service points.” The library uses mobile book vehicles to go to villages 50 times annually, but mainly delivers books and conducts cultural activities for villagers in the county seat and surrounding townships, with the furthest reach being villages around the county seat. Children in remote mountain villages cannot benefit from these services. An important reason is that the county library is understaffed, and “introducing high-quality talent is an urgent priority” [23].

In summary, with strong government promotion at all levels, China’s public cultural service facility construction has achieved remarkable results. Some poverty-stricken areas have established a “county-township-village” three-tier main-branch system. However, due to the inability of nearby township libraries and village libraries to operate normally, rural children in remote villages cannot enjoy public reading services. The root cause of the inability of township and village libraries to operate normally is the lack of full-time management personnel and professional service talents. Therefore, this study attempts to address the personnel problem to activate reading services at grassroots service points. Specifically, graduate students returning home for the Spring Festival serve as volunteers to carry out reading promotion activities in village libraries, reaching out to children in poverty-stricken areas, studying their reading behaviors and problems, and seeking good strategies to promote the effective operation of the county library main-branch system.

3. Research Design and Implementation

3.1 Research Site Selection

The study was conducted in G Village, Luotian County, Huanggang City, Hubei Province. Luotian County is a nationally designated poverty-stricken county located in the southern foothills of the Dabie Mountains. G Village is an administrative village in the county, consisting of eight natural villages. The village committee is located in one of these natural villages, with distances of approximately 5-20 minutes’ walk between them. G Village features mountainous terrain and a remote location, 21 kilometers from the county seat and 10 kilometers from the town center. Without public bus service, villagers travel to town or the county seat by electric bike or private car, making transportation very inconvenient. The village has a traditionally conservative cultural atmosphere, with villagers primarily earning income through migrant work and traditional agricultural production.

G Village hung a “Rural Book House” sign at the entrance of the village com-

mittee office as early as 2011, but at that time there was no dedicated space or bookshelves, and books were not displayed. In 2019, the village committee built a new two-story office building and used a room of about 40 square meters at the back of the first-floor office hall as a senior activity center and library, designated as the “Senior Activity Center.” A row of bookshelves lined the wall, displaying 750 agricultural books, most of which were relatively old.

During the one-month winter vacation period from February 1-28, 2021, the researcher used an empty room in the village committee’s old office as a reading room, borrowed some tables and chairs from the village, and carried out reading promotion activities. Although the new office building had a library, it was only open during office hours and could not guarantee activity times. Additionally, the library was too close to office staff and facilities, which would disturb office workers during activities and pose some safety hazards. The old office was about 300 meters from the new office building, in a quiet environment familiar to villagers, making it a suitable activity venue.

3.2 Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited from primary and secondary school students returning home for the Spring Festival. The researcher initially posted a message in the G Village WeChat group, announcing that graduate students returning home for the Spring Festival would provide free centralized homework guidance during the winter vacation using the village committee’s old office, but only a few parents responded. Subsequently, the researcher contacted some parents, introduced the reading activities and requirements during the centralized homework guidance period, and mobilized them to have their children participate. Finally, 12 students registered for homework guidance, of which 10 were willing to participate in reading activities, including 7 boys and 3 girls. Eight were primary school students and two were junior high school students. Among these 10 students, only one normally lived at home and attended a township primary school 6.4 kilometers away; three primary school students attended school in the county seat with parental accompaniment; four primary school students attended school in the town as day students with parental accompaniment; and two junior high school students boarded at the town school. They all returned home for the winter vacation, with varying distances from the activity venue. Five came from the natural village where the village committee was located, two needed a 5-minute walk, and three needed a 15-minute walk.

According to the “Children and Adolescents Graded Reading Content Selection Standards” issued by the Southern Graded Reading Research Center, extracurricular reading is divided into four stages: Stage 1 (Grades 1-2), Stage 2 (Grades 3-4), Stage 3 (Grades 5-6), and Stage 4 (Grades 7-9) [24]. Based on these standards, the distribution of these 10 students was: 3 in Stage 1, 3 in Stage 2, 2 in Stage 3, and 2 in Stage 4.

The first day involved interviews to understand the extracurricular reading sit-

uation of the 10 students, as shown in . The results show that their extracurricular reading materials were mainly purchased by parents or exchanged with classmates, with only one student having borrowed books from a library. Four students had participated in reading activities, specifically school poetry recitation competitions. Extracurricular reading content focused mainly on Chinese classic literature.

3.3 Reading Materials Preparation

Based on the researcher’s personal collection and supplemented with additional purchases, a total of 32 types and 85 books were prepared for students to borrow. Eighteen of these titles were included in the “Basic Reading List for Primary and Secondary Schools” compiled by the New Reading Research Institute, as well as the “Reading Guidance Catalog for Primary and Secondary Schools” and the “2019 Recommended Book List for Primary and Secondary School Libraries (Rooms)” compiled by the Ministry of Education. Specifically, for Stage 1: three books including *Guess How Much I Love You*, *Will You Be My Friend?*, and *No Brains and Unhappy*; Stage 2: three books including *Charlotte’s Web*, *Andersen’s Fairy Tales*, and *Father and Son*; Stage 3: six books including *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Alchemist*, *Stars and Spring Water*, and *The Little Prince*; Stage 4: six books including *Jane Eyre*, *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, *Camel Xiangzi*, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, *Childhood*, and *Fu Lei’s Family Letters*. Other books, though not on these lists, were also mainly classics with healthy content suitable for primary and secondary school students, such as *Childhood*, *Insects*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Shadow Thief*, *Dad’s Teacher*, and *Plot Against*.

3.4 Reading Activities

From February 1-28, 2021 (four weeks), except for February 10-14 (the five days from the 29th day of the twelfth lunar month to the third day of the first lunar month), the reading room was open daily from 8:00-11:00 AM and 2:00-5:00 PM. Morning sessions focused on centralized homework guidance or reading activities, while afternoons were for independent reading or homework completion. The reading activities conducted are listed by week in , with February 8-25 designated for student self-borrowing and independent reading (hence not listed in the table).

3.4.1 Book Recommendation and Film Viewing Research shows that reverse recommendation—where readers first encounter derivative works before reading the original—can better stimulate reading interest [25]. Therefore, after determining recommended books for the four stages, movies were shown to students four times, encouraging them to read the original works after viewing. All students participated in the film viewing activities and read the recommended books.

3.4.2 Thematic Lectures and Book Borrowing As shown in , only one student had borrowed books from a library. In fact, rural children’s awareness and utilization of libraries are very low, mainly because there are no libraries nearby or libraries cannot operate normally. To address this, the study designed a lecture on reading knowledge to introduce students to libraries and reading-related information. To further deepen their understanding of libraries, the researcher simulated library borrowing patterns using the provided books as the “collection” to conduct book borrowing activities. Students used postcards as “library cards” to borrow books, with EXCEL spreadsheets used for registration.

Based on students’ stages, each student was given a mandatory reading book. The mandatory books for the four stages were *No Brains and Unhappy*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, and *Jane Eyre*. These were selected because they have film adaptations and multiple copies to ensure one book per person. Other books were placed in the temporary reading room for students to borrow freely.

3.4.3 Storytelling Sessions Rural children rarely have opportunities to participate in reading activities. Among the 10 participants in this study, four had participated in school poetry recitation competitions and one claimed to have parent-child reading experience. To evoke their reading interest in a relaxed atmosphere, the study chose storytelling sessions—a format requiring no training or testing, only listening. A total of five sessions were held, as shown in . The first session had eight participants, with two Stage 3 students absent; sessions 2-5 only had three third-grade boys from the same natural village.

4. Results Analysis

During the reading room’s operation, students came daily to participate in activities or do homework. In weeks 1-2, morning attendance exceeded 12 people; in weeks 3-4, morning attendance was generally 7-8 people. The lower attendance in the latter two weeks was because Stage 4 students were kept at home by parents to do homework. In the afternoons, only three third-grade boys attended regularly, as their homes were close to the reading room. Additionally, five students who had not registered for homework guidance came to the reading room two or three times to do homework.

Four interviews were conducted during the activity period. The first interview investigated students’ extracurricular reading status, with results shown in . The second interview examined reading progress and experiences from weeks 1-2. The third interview explored students’ views on storytelling sessions. The fourth interview gathered their feelings about various activities and reading experiences. Based on interview information, borrowing records, and observations, the implementation effects of the reading promotion activities are analyzed below.

4.1 Reading Progress and Experience

The survey found that during weeks 1-2, all students were reading. Except for the first student who had no fixed reading time, the other nine students read daily, with reading time ranging from half an hour to three hours. Four students preferred reading at home, five preferred reading in the reading room, and one read both at home and in the reading room. All students read the recommended books and enjoyed them.

Students' reading progress and experiences with the recommended books are shown in . The numbering in follows the order of students by stage and grade, with student number 1 being a first-grade primary school student. The results show that reading performance in Stage 1 was unsatisfactory, while other stages performed well. The three Stage 1 students did not like the recommended book *No Brains and Unhappy*, indicating inappropriate book selection. In fact, this book is purely text-based rather than a picture book. Stage 1 students have very limited character recognition, making pure text books somewhat difficult. Picture books with minimal text should have been recommended. Students 1-2 found their favorite picture books, not only finishing them but also developing emotional engagement. Student 3 did not borrow picture books in weeks 1-2, but after encountering the picture book *Guess How Much I Love You* at the week 3 storytelling session, borrowed the picture story *Father and Son*. This also demonstrates that choice opportunities are crucial for readers. Providing them with appropriately difficult and richly varied reading materials for selection is the primary task of reading services.

4.2 Participation in Reading Activities

The activities included film viewing, book recommendation, thematic lectures, book borrowing, and storytelling sessions. All 10 students participated and gained benefits, including: recognizing more characters, acquiring knowledge, reading books they hadn't seen before, meeting more people, learning more about reading, and understanding that libraries are places for reading. When asked about their favorite activities: book borrowing accounted for 30%, film viewing 30%, book recommendation 20%, storytelling sessions 10%, and thematic lectures 10%. For future activities they most wanted to participate in: book borrowing 30%, film viewing 20%, book recommendation 10%, and storytelling sessions 10%. Book borrowing and film viewing were most popular because they provided opportunities to access more books. Book recommendation was second, as the recommended books were previously unread and greatly enjoyed. Storytelling sessions and lectures were also valued because they increased knowledge, with some students particularly enjoying the question-and-answer segments.

Storytelling sessions did not achieve the expected results. The first session had nine participants, but only three attended the subsequent four sessions. Students who did not attend expressed a preference for reading independently.

The reason may be the monotonous format of storytelling, with the researcher doing all the talking from beginning to end. Some students suggested that they could tell stories themselves in the future. Therefore, future storytelling sessions could adopt more diverse formats, such as having students take turns telling stories or performing story dramas to involve everyone.

4.3 Book Borrowing Situation

As previously mentioned, rural children's awareness and utilization of libraries are very low. The first interview found that only one student had borrowed books from a library. In this study, the researcher conducted a special lecture to inform students that libraries are places where books can be borrowed and read for free. The researcher also used personal collections to provide borrowing services in the reading room, giving students freedom of choice. Book borrowing became the students' favorite activity. The comments of student 6 best represent their feelings: "I like the book borrowing activity most because I can freely borrow books I've never read before."

Students' borrowing patterns were as follows: six students borrowed 2-3 books, two borrowed 9 books, and two did not borrow books. Most borrowing began after the lecture (February 8) and books were returned when the activity ended (February 25). The two students who borrowed 9 books returned them on the same day or the next day. The two students who did not borrow books in the reading room read books from their own or classmates' collections.

During the fourth interview, all students could name the extracurricular books they had read during the vacation. According to interview statistics, students' total reading volume during the vacation was 40 books, with an average of 4 books per person, ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 10 books. Reading volumes across the four stages were 11, 10, 11, and 8 books respectively, with minimal differences between stages.

5. Strategic Suggestions for Grassroots Library Services for Rural Children in Poverty-Stricken Areas

Due to the lack of full-time management personnel, the rural book house in G Village's village committee office building has remained idle for a long time. Through the researcher's efforts from February 1-28, 2021, some primary and secondary school students returning home for the Spring Festival were organized to use the old village committee office and personal book collections for homework guidance and a series of reading activities. This allowed students to enjoy the pleasure of reading and basically develop good reading habits. This fully demonstrates that volunteers can activate grassroots service points of libraries, and that grassroots libraries can certainly make a difference and produce practical results in serving rural children's reading in poverty-stricken areas.

A grassroots library reading service system is "a service system composed of

reading spaces, facilities, resources, talents, services, and operational mechanisms of grassroots libraries” [20]. Only by properly constructing these key elements can the normal operation and effectiveness of grassroots library reading service systems be ensured. Based on the activity characteristics of rural children and experience gained in G Village, the following strategic suggestions are proposed to help establish a grassroots library reading service system that enables rural children to benefit continuously.

5.1 Building a Comprehensive Grassroots Library Reading Service System According to Local Conditions

Poverty-stricken areas are not only economically backward but often have harsh natural environments. Taking Luotian County as an example, its mountainous terrain results in scattered residents and long distances, with very inconvenient transportation. In this context, building a grassroots library reading service system covering the entire county should follow principles of county-wide coordination, proximity service, practical results, and local adaptation. The county government should coordinate uniformly, break through administrative system limitations, and concentrate human, material, and financial resources to integrate libraries from various systems into a unified construction.

Children are the key target of library reading promotion services. Rural children have strong seasonal mobility, with activity spaces mainly including: their residential natural villages, kindergartens, primary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools. When children from G Village attend primary or junior high school, many parents rent houses in the town to accompany them. Since kindergartens and primary and secondary schools are generally located in townships or county seats, this means that from kindergarten onward, they spend most of their time not in the village but in the town or county seat, only returning to the village during winter and summer vacations. The children of migrant workers may only return to their hometown for the Spring Festival. Therefore, according to the spatial and temporal distribution characteristics of rural children’s activities, township libraries should be the focus of construction.

In the “county-township-village” three-tier system, townships and villages are the weak links. Compared with villages, townships have fewer numbers and concentrated populations. Taking Luotian County in Hubei Province as an example, the county has 10 towns, 2 townships, and 415 villages. Given this actual situation, it is recommended to adopt a strategy of focusing on building township libraries. The county government should build a relatively large library in each township, equipped with full-time management and service personnel, to function both as a township branch and as a school library. This would ensure the reading needs of rural children attending kindergartens, primary schools, and junior high schools in the town are met. Schools located in county seats and townships could also build independent school libraries if conditions permit.

As for village libraries at the most grassroots level, it is relatively difficult to

equip them with full-time management personnel. How to ensure these grassroots service points operate normally? A simple and effective solution is villagers' self-governance. The reading room can be entrusted to nearby villagers for daily management, and during winter and summer vacations, it can be handed over to returning university and graduate students to carry out diverse reading promotion activities.

Additionally, county libraries should introduce several professional reading service talents to guide reading service work throughout the county.

5.2 Establishing Relatively Independent Reading Spaces

Whether township libraries or village libraries, they should have relatively independent spaces. The experience in G Village also demonstrates the feasibility of establishing relatively independent reading spaces. The old village committee office building was in good condition and idle, making it suitable for use. For those already combined with other facilities, separate entrances can be created for convenient access without mutual interference or safety hazards. For example, the 40-square-meter space in G Village's new office building currently used as a senior activity center and library could be divided into two 20-square-meter independent spaces from a practical perspective, also facilitating villagers' self-governance.

5.3 Providing Abundant and Diverse Reading Resources

The lack of reading resources is a major problem facing rural children's reading. County libraries have rich reading resources but are too far away, making them inaccessible to most rural children. Village libraries are closer to rural children but generally lack appropriate book resources. For example, G Village's rural book house has 750 books, none of which meet rural children's reading needs.

The Ministry of Education and some professional reading research institutions have compiled recommended reading lists. County libraries can use these lists to allocate basic reading resources for township libraries and village libraries. Then, within budget constraints, they can add some books outside the lists to ensure abundant quantities and diverse types, giving rural children more choices. Additionally, regular reading needs surveys can be conducted to deliver targeted reading resources to service points. For example, providing high-quality picture books for preschool children and Stage 1 students.

5.4 Organizing Volunteers as Reading Service Personnel

Librarians are the soul of libraries. Full-time librarians can ensure normal operation of grassroots service points, and professionally trained librarians can improve reading service levels. Township libraries and village libraries cannot operate normally precisely because they are not equipped with full-time management personnel. The experience of G Village shows that returning university and graduate students can solve the talent shortage problem at service points.

County libraries can develop a special “Rural Children’s Reading Service Volunteers” program, building a volunteer service platform to attract university and graduate students from various towns and villages to register as volunteers. During winter and summer vacations, they can rely on their hometown’s township libraries and village libraries to provide homework guidance, reading room services, book borrowing, and reading guidance for neighboring children.

To ensure volunteers’ service levels and quality, county libraries can formulate unified service and assessment standards, design diverse and interesting reading activities, and conduct short-term training. After passing the examination, volunteers can return to their hometowns to carry out service point construction and reading services.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitation of this study is that it only conducted reading status surveys and reading promotion services for primary and junior high school students in one village. The research subjects did not include preschool children or senior high school students, and no cooperation was established with the county library. In follow-up research, we will cooperate with county libraries, township libraries, and more village libraries, apply the above strategies, conduct rural children’s reading services on a broader scale, and test the feasibility and effectiveness of the strategies.

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] To carry out experimental research on reading service for rural children in a village library in poverty-stricken areas would be helpful to find effective strategies to promote the construction of grassroots libraries. [Method/process] The researcher worked as a volunteer in the one-month winter vacation in a village library of a state-level poverty-stricken county to carry out homework guidance and a series of reading activities for primary and junior high school students returning home for the Spring Festival. [Result/conclusion] The intervention of volunteers can effectively activate the grassroots service points, and four suggestions are put forward for the grassroots libraries in poverty-stricken areas: To build the reading service systems of the grassroots libraries according to local conditions, focus on the professional construction, management and operation of township branch libraries, and introduce professional talents to guide the reading services of the whole county; To set up a relatively independent reading space for easy management and operation; To allocate reading resources for the village libraries that meet the needs of rural children; To organize college students to serve as reading service volunteers in township and village libraries during the winter and summer vacations.

Keywords: poverty-stricken areas; grassroots libraries; rural children’s reading services; reading promotion; professional reading service talents

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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