

BRINGING BOOKS TO BLOOMS: SERVICE LEARNING INITIATIVES ENRICH RURAL SCHOOLS WITH OUTDOOR READING NOOKS

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Abstract

The SULAM (Service learning Malaysia-University for Society) project aims to bridge educational gaps in rural areas while providing University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) students with practical, community-focused learning experiences. As part of a Social Inequality course, 156 students collaborated to construct an outdoor reading nook for Sekolah Kebangsaan Kokol in Sabah. Despite challenges related to the remote location and limited resources, the students successfully created a vibrant learning environment, including a playground and fish pond. Organized into specialized teams, they undertook task such as construction, fundraising, and community engagement. This project not only enhanced the educational infrastructure of SK Kokol but also demonstrated the value of service learning in addressing social disparities and fostering civic responsibility among students. The initiative underscores the importance of integrating practical, community-oriented activities into academic curricula to promote social equity and develop socially conscious graduates.

Keywords: *Service learning, rural education, social inequality, community engagement, educational infrastructure*



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INTRODUCTION

The level of interest and sense of urgency in community and voluntary service grows greater every day (Honnett & Poulsen, 1989). Service learning is a powerful approach that allows students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world situations while addressing community needs. It is an experiential learning that integrates practical experiences into the academic curriculum (Norhafezah, et al., 2020), enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes via servicing the community (Wan Nur Arina, et al., 2024). In Malaysia, Service Learning Malaysia-University for Society (SULAM) has been introduced as an innovative approach to teaching and learning. SULAM pedagogy is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which the student participates in a structured service activity that meets identified community needs and reflects on the service activity and experiences to achieve desired learning outcomes, in such a way as to gain a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (SULAM Playbook, 2019). By

leveraging the SULAM approach, students involved in the community project will have the opportunity to make a meaningful impact on the lives of their peers while gaining valuable hands-on experience.

As part of this project, 156 students from the University Malaysia Sabah (UMS), who were taking a Social Inequality course (2023-2024 session), helped a rural primary school in Sekolah Kebangsaan Kokol (SK Kokol), Sabah, to build an outdoor reading nook. Access to quality education and adequate facilities is often limited in rural areas, leading to social inequality and regional disparities. This community project aims to bring happiness to rural primary school students by building a proper space for reading activities.

SK Kokol is a primary school located in the rural area of Kota Kinabalu, Sabah—namely Kampung Kokol, Menggatal. To better understand Kampung Kokol's rurality, it is located around 40 kilometres from Kota Kinabalu city centre. The school is educating around 187 students from Year 1 to Year 6 and 21 preschool students. Due to the school's growing number of students, they were forced to turn their previous library into a classroom. This caused the library's space to become tiny and only used to store a limited number of books. In the long run, this situation can hinder students from advancing their knowledge to higher levels and may act as a barrier to pursuing further studies. Libraries play a crucial role in facilitating knowledge exploration and creation. Some libraries even encourage engagement with new ideas, leading to unique life experiences (Richard & Rachel, 2020). Hence, this outdoor reading nook offers a designated space for students to read. Moreover, this project includes a small playground and fish pond, providing students a place to enjoy reading and relax.

METHOD

This SULAM project consists of the active participation of 156 students, all collaboratively working toward creating a substantial positive effect through their united endeavours. These students have been strategically divided into eight focused teams, each taking on specific tasks such as construction, fundraising, webinars, documentaries, website creation, conducting surveys, and arranging decorations, ensuring a well-coordinated effort within the project's framework. One dynamic group of approximately 36 students has taken on the pivotal role of constructing the Nook structure, dedicating their weekends to bring this vision to life.

Every Saturday and Sunday, the students begin their efforts at 9.00 am, boarding the university van to navigate the hilly terrain to Sk Kokol, a trip that takes about 30-45 minutes, and sometimes their diligent work doesn't conclude until 9.00 pm. Despite the journey duration of 30-45 minutes from the university, the team's enthusiasm for the project remains undiminished. Their ambitious task list covers a diverse range of construction goals, from installing a transparent roof to erecting stairs and crafting bookshelves.

In addition to furniture like tables and chairs, the project ambitiously includes the creation of a pool and a small playground to enhance the area's allure. The construction team is well-equipped, with tools such as chainsaws, wood and steel cutters, hammers, and an array of other necessary construction tools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This course delves into the pervasive social disparities across communities due to various factors. These disparities often crystallize into barriers affecting status, education, income, and more, reinforcing societal divides. It is a central aim of the course to instill

in students an awareness that ‘distance difference’ – the gap between urban and rural communities – can exacerbate inequalities in different communities both a vision and a practical goal for those enrolled in the course. The school, situated atop Kokol Hills, exemplifies the stark inequity in educational support from the government, an issue exacerbated by its remote and less accessible location. This disparity is especially apparent in the lack of a library – a crucial learning resource – putting future generations at risk.

This SULAM project, a legacy continued by three different cohorts of students who completed this course, along with the lecturer, funder, school communities, etc., seeks to close the gap in educational facilities. Despite not being experts, the UMS students are committed to enhancing the basic structure left by their predecessors, transforming it into a functional and appealing library. This year’s focus is on refining the established building and adding attractions like a gazebo, fish pond, mini playground, and colorful stairs, to create a more engaging learning environment.



Figure 1. Crafting Geometry – UMS Students erecting a Hexagonal Fish Pond

On the initial school visit, the construction team assessed what could be revitalized using local resources, like old bamboo. This observation phase allowed for strategic planning around materials and a swift transition into action, ensuring no delay in execution. The nook consists of a two-story structure; the lower level houses the core library, while the upper level offers students a tranquil study space amid scenic hills and sunsets.



Figure 2. Innovative Repurposing – UMS Students Crafting Tables and Chairs from Recycled Pallets

As the project progressed into its third week, the team embarked on crafting a transparent roof for the open-concept second floor. They also constructed bookshelves, study tables, and chairs suitable for young learners, primarily using solid recycled wood pallets. A splash of vibrant paint added the final touch, creating a lively and welcoming ambience. The decoration team also played a crucial role in elevating the building's appeal, adorning it with artistic paintings and various decorations. With each passing week, our collective efforts culminated in a structure that radiated beauty and charm.

Beyond the construction of the Nook, the SULAM project incorporated additional features to entice students to the space, such as a mini playground. This addition serves to invigorate the children, ensuring their library visits are filled with activity and preventing any sense of monotony. As Arianti (2019) notes, the presence of decorative elements can help sustain children's attention and engagement in their studies.



Figure 3. Nostalgic Recreation – UMS Students built 'Ting-Ting', a Classic 1970s Playground Game

The playground emerged from a joint endeavour between the construction and decoration teams who laid a concrete foundation to create a playing area known as 'ting-ting'. Decorated with vibrant colours and numbers, the game space was designed to dazzle and engage young minds. Likewise, the construction of a hexagonal fish pond involved prepping the site, excavating to the desired depth, and meticulously crafting the shape with bricks and concrete. A final layer of plaster and a coat of colourful paint completed the inviting feature.



Figure 4. The Final Nook

CONCLUSION

SULAM stands as a pivotal educational initiative at all Universities in Malaysia, fostering robust connections among students, lecturers, and the wider community. Central to this initiative is the SULAM-Reading in Paradise project, devoted to establishing a mini-library at the remote SK Kokol in Kota Kinabalu. Spearheaded by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities students, the project mobilised several specialised teams covering construction, fundraising, webinars, documentaries, website, surveys and decorations. The enduring outcome of their collaboration is a captivating library complemented by additional amenities such as a gazebo, fishponds, and playgrounds. These efforts not only bolster learning accessibility for SK Kokol students, enhancing their educational prospects but also embody the SULAM project's commitment to advancing social justice and instilling a sense of civic duty in students to nurture a more equitable and harmonious society.

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