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# CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### Introduction

A child's developmental process reveals that information plays an indispensable role at every developmental stage. Access to information and ideas can be a powerful catalyst in providing hope for the child's future. The information process in a child begins even before birth, and accompanies him or her throughout childhood and at further stages of human development. Information received affects the physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of the child. The way in which a child learns to walk and talk and how he or she plays and communicates with others is also due to the information he or she has received. Information plays an important role both in the development of his/her identity and personality and his or her social development (Koren, 1997).

As the child grows older he or she may meet new friends who have a different way of life. The child will develop interest in various sports, hobbies and crafts. Later at the puberty and adolescent stage, physiological and other changes take place. All those changes will also make information needs of the child become more numerous, and varied (Anuar, 1979). In addition technological, social, economical and political developments have also a great impact on children's life today. Computer technology, for example, is fast becoming a natural part of the modern child's life. Other technological developments, which have entered children's lives, are pocket

calculators, cassette recorders, videocassette, and compact radios. All of these offer new possibilities for broadening children's experiences and all demand new skills, while making some traditional skills less important.

Besides the technological factor, new phenomena like AIDS, drug abuse, child abuse, kidnapping, suicide, single parent and working parents, for example, have added a burden to children's life, making their life more challenging than before.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Studies of information needs have grown steadily for more than forty years. Early user studies concentrated on the users of scientific and technical information (Martyn, 1974). At the beginning of the 1970s there were virtually no studies which focused on the information needs of the general public (Dervin et al., 1976). Recent research, however, has attempted to develop new models for studying work-related information needs in an attempt to devise better guidelines for systems design (Rhode, 1986).

Studies on information needs of children, however, were not given much emphasis in the user studies. This has been indicated in several studies. Walter (1994) stated in her study that there is no knowledge base at present that is specifically devoted to the information needs of children. In another report, Smith (1995) indicated that there is lack of effort for investment in library services for children and young people in United Kingdom. In Malaysia no studies have been done at full-scale on

children's information needs. This is not surprising as Library and Information Science is only beginning to gain popularity lately. In 1980, the School Of Library and Information Science, MARA Institute of Technology made an effort to highlight the importance of information in improving productivity and development by organizing a seminar (Oli Mohammed and Wong, 1983). The information needs of adults and work related information needs were presented and discussed in the seminar, but there were no discussion on the information needs of children. A search through the literature especially in the Educational Research and Planning Department's library too revealed no evidence of any research done on information needs of children in Malaysia.

Therefore this study could play an important role in user studies on children in this country. Besides helping various groups, this research also would help in developing the discipline of Library and Information Science in this country.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to

- (a) elicit the opinion of adults who work with children about the primary information needs of children in selected four regions in Peninsular Malaysia.
- (b) identify the current sources of information to children as perceived by adults. How far do those sources meet the information needs of children?

- (c) identify the major information gap among children as perceived by adults, if any.
- (d) identify the reasons for the gap, if any.
- (e) elicit opinions on how to overcome the problems faced by information providers to children.

With the above objectives in mind, this study would seek answers to the following research questions.

### **Research Questions**

There are five research questions as identified below.

1. What are the primary information needs of children in the selected four region in Peninsular Malaysia?
2. What are the current information sources for these children?
3. How well are those information needs of children met?
4. What information do they need that they are not getting, if any and why are the children not getting these information?
5. What could be done to improve the quality and quantity of information that identified in the sample?

## **Significance of the Study**

Just like adults, children have information need that if met, would enable them to solve problems in particular situations. As Kulthau (1993) indicated in her study, children are unaware of their information needs thus significant adults in the lives of children minister to the information needs that they perceive to be important. Parents and teachers are the prominent information providers to children. Inexperience and lack of knowledge on child development among parents and teachers may cause information gap among children. Extensive growth in the information and media today also contribute to the inability of parents and teachers to provide the right information to children. A number of research studies conducted in the West, like the study by Walter (1994), have shown that a reasonable information needs of children are unmet.

A search through the literature showed that no research studies have been conducted in Malaysia on information needs of children. A search in the Education Ministry's Planing and Research Department library, university libraries and consultation of librarians indicated that few such research studies have been conducted in our country till today. As such, this study can be a pioneer and the outcome could benefit parties who are dealing with children. The findings of the study can be used as a significant reference guide by parents who are burdened with the responsibility of child rearing. Parents who do not have much training and knowledge on needs of children especially information needs, can use the outcome of the research to upgrade their knowledge on what should be given to children at every level of age. The

findings can also be made use in workshop sessions to carry out discussions among participants, especially in the parenting workshops.

Teachers, the next important people in children's life can also benefit from the study. Primary school teachers can use the findings of this study to strengthen their knowledge on the needs of students. It is hoped that this study would help teachers to carry out activities to fulfill children's information needs. The school librarian can use the findings of the study to identify the books and other suitable materials for their collection. It will also help in drawing up a clear acquisition policy of these libraries.

In addition, outcome of the study can also be extended to the education ministry. Educational Technology Division (BTP) which has been given the task of maintaining and upgrading the school resource centers can use the findings to compare how much the existing facilities and activities help students especially in primary schools. Here the findings can be used as a guide in their policy making. Other than BTP the outcome of the study can also be of some help to the Teachers Training Division, Curriculum Development Center and the School Division. The findings can be used in their practices and policy reviews.

At present the Malaysian Government is, drawing up plans for the educational system widely known as 'Smart School'. One of the aims of the Smart Schools as stated by Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Haji Abdul Razak, The Minister of Education, Malaysia is,

“.....to create a new generation of Malaysians. Malaysians who are more creative and innovative in their thinking, adapt with new technologies, and able to access and manage completely the information”

(MDC, 1997)

The findings of this study can be made use by the Curriculum Development Center (PPK) to identify what should be provided to children in primary schools in relation to information seeking behavior which is given great emphasis in the 'Smart Schools'.

A study conducted by the Library and Information Services Council in the United States (Smith, 1995) noted that problems abound in public and education library services for children and young people are evident in failure to accord proper priority to children in terms of their information needs. The situation is quite similar in Malaysia. There is not much evidence showing that school and public libraries conduct proper user needs analysis to be used in their planning and development program, This is because customer driven service is given very little emphasis in library service in this country. As such, this study will explore children's information needs and factors that create the information gap. Suggestions would be useful to personnel of these libraries in drafting their development plan. The methodology used in this study could also be used as a tool in conducting user need analysis in this country.

Library and Information Science can be considered as a new field in Malaysia. As for today, only four institutions of higher learning in this country offer this course at Master's level. Research on user needs is almost non-existent. This research could also contribute to the development of discipline on information in this country.

### **Assumptions**

Three assumptions are made for the present study. First, the study assumes that just like adults, children too have information need. The second assumption is that children are frequently unaware of those needs. The third assumption is that as children are unaware of their information needs, significant adults in the lives of children minister to the information needs that they perceive to be important.

### **Limitation of the Study**

This study intends to identify the information needs of children and related issues as perceived by adults who work closely with children in the four regions in Peninsular Malaysia. Since the respondents or the informants are adults, the findings depend much on the experience and knowledge of these respondents had on children's life. As such, the findings of this study would be limited to the experience and knowledge of these respondents about children. However, this limitation will be kept at minimum by using a good selection procedure in the identification of the respondents. The second limitation of this study will be that the findings will only be applicable within the four geographical region of the study because the respondents are from those four regions.

## **Definition of Terms**

The important terms used in this study are;

### **Information**

There are many different definitions given for the term information. However the term 'information' used in this study is referred as any piece of text, or data, document, report, book, collection, knowledge, market intelligence, link, association, perception, rumor, hunch or simple idea which is held in any medium.

### **Information Needs**

The association of the word information with needs in this study implies a basic need similar to other basic human needs, divided into three categories; physiological, affective, and cognitive needs. As part of the search for satisfaction of these needs, an individual may seek information. A need is what an individual ought to have for his work, education, recreation and etc. Thus needs can be equated to necessity. Needs in this context are both instrumental and purposeful.

In defining information needs, two other terms '*wants*' and '*demands*' have to be distinguished. A want is what an individual would like to have; a want may or may not be translated into a demand on the library. A demand on the other hand is what an individual asks in our context, of a library. Not all individual demands can be a need. According to Green (1990), the element that clearly distinguishes a need from a want or a demand is that there is no necessary self-awareness of a need. People frequently

need things without being aware of the need. This is very much true in children. With their more limited experience of the world, children lack the frame of reference to articulate many of their most important information needs. As a result adults must articulate those needs for them. Hence the respondents in this study are adults who are involved in children's lives.

### **Children**

The term children in the context of this study refer to children at the age of ten, eleven, and twelve. Children of this age group are in the phase two of primary school education in Malaysia. Children at this age are at the concrete operational developmental stage as defined by Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, children's thought processes are well developed at this stage and they are particularly receptive to information that will help in their developmental process (Siegler, 1991). Children of this age group are capable of learning critical thinking skills that will help them in evaluating information.