e-Activities for At Risk Youths in Malaysia

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Abstract: - ICT facilities at welfare homes need proper planning and strategies in order to ensure the technology can be of assistance in adding value for at-risk youths academically, socially and economically. This paper describes the needs of e-activities for at-risk youths in 5 welfare homes in 4 states in Malaysia. Administrators at these welfare homes were interviewed to gather information regarding current ICT practices at the homes and observations of ICT facilities and activities were carried out. Findings indicated a high level of awareness of the importance of ICT knowledge for this group among administrators. However, they reported that there are many barriers to e-inclusion activities at these homes.

Keywords: - e-activities, at-risk youth, marginalized groups, Malaysia

1 Introduction

The applications and e-inclusion activities are provided not just for the have-nots and marginalized groups. The provision of ICT facilities at welfare homes need proper planning and strategies in order to ensure the technology can be of assistance in adding value for at-risk youths academically, socially and economically. This paper describes the needs of at-risk youths in 5 welfare homes in 4 states in Malaysia. These youths are below 18 and have been placed in these homes under the order of the court for several reasons, such as involvement in criminal activities, immoral activities such as prostitution, out of wedlock pregnancies, victims of incest cases and being “out of control.” Administrators at these welfare homes were interviewed to gather information regarding current ICT practices at the homes and observations of ICT facilities and activities were carried out. This paper will present the findings of the research and recommendations for e-inclusion activities for at risk youths.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Children in Welfare Homes in Malaysia

Government welfare homes in Malaysia, which are under the auspices of the Department of Social Welfare, are established to provide care for the elderly, people and children with disabilities, abandoned children and children who are having problems with the law. Children with disabilities in these welfare homes are usually children who have severe mental disabilities and their care have been relinquished to the state by their legal caregivers or parents. Children who have been abandoned were picked up by welfare officers off the street.
and placed in these welfare homes. For these children, efforts are made to track down their parents.

Under the Child Act 2001 of Malaysia, a child is defined as a person under the age of 18. As a minor, under the law, a child lacks the responsibility and thus may not be sentenced as an adult for the crime s/he committed. Instead of being sent to prison, these juvenile delinquents are sent to welfare homes. Apart from minors who have committed crimes, there is another group of juveniles who are also sent to these welfare homes under acts which are known as “status offences.” In Malaysia, there are two forms of “status offences;” the first one is known as “being beyond control of parents” and the second is being exposed to moral danger (Abdul Hadi 1990). Section 46 of the Child Act 2001 defines children “being beyond control of parents” as those who run away from home and being habitually disobedient and incorrigible. The definition of being exposed to moral danger is defined by Section 38 of this act as a child’s involvement in prostitution or in employment which facilitates sexual intimacy. Children involved under the Section 38 of this act are female and they are deemed as needing protection.

Children who resided in these government welfare homes are provided with the basic necessities such as food and health services. The Department of Social Welfare strives to improve their quality of life of these children by providing them with various programs such as vocational courses, religious classes and counseling. The objectives of these homes are to assist these children to join the mainstream society once they leave these welfare homes, able to be independent and contribute to society.

2.2 E- Activities

In this era of knowledge-based economy, it is very important to ensure that children in these welfare homes have access to ICT and are ICT literate. As the main objective of these homes are to prepare these children to be independent economically after they leave, by not providing them with ICT skills, this objective may not be achieved. A majority of these children do not attend government schools due to various reasons, such as, long-term truancy prior to living in the home, dropping out from school, and their criminal history. Therefore, they do not benefit from the ICT classes provided in government schools. As such, it is even more important for ICT lessons to be provided in the welfare homes.

In order to ensure ICT literacy among children in these welfare homes, more information is needed so that suitable facilities and modules can be provided for the benefits to be optimized. This study was carried out as an initial effort towards understanding the ICT needs of children in these homes.

3 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative method, using observation and interviews to collect data. Data was collected from 5 welfare homes in 4 states in Malaysia participated in this study. These homes are for youths below 18 and have been placed in these homes under the order of the court for several reasons, such as involvement in criminal activities, immoral activities such as prostitution, out of wedlock pregnancies, victims of incest cases and being “out of control.”

Interviews were conducted to the administrators of the homes to gather information regarding current ICT practices at the homes and observations of ICT facilities and activities were carried out.

Research questions:
1. What ICT facilities are provided by the welfare homes for at-risk youths in Malaysia?
2. What is the level of awareness among the administrators of the homes towards the use of ICT among at-risk youths in Malaysia?
3. What kind of ICT training needed by the youths in the welfare homes for at-risk youths in Malaysia?

4 Findings

The findings will be divided into 3 sections: a) the home and ICT facilities b) level of awareness among the administrators on the need of ICT among youths and c) ICT training needed for the youths. First of all, among all the 5 homes observed, 3 homes are for males and two for females. Among the five homes, only one home has a good ICT facility. Below are the descriptions of the homes and ICT facilities that they have.

4.1 The homes and ICT facilities

Home 1(AART): This home is for male youths from the age of 13 to 18 years old. They are placed here for a year rehabilitation under cases of either court order, criminal or request by family. There are only 26 youths at the home and only one goes to school. The youths’ literacy level is from high to low. About 5 of them cannot read, and some can read but with help. In terms of computer facilities, this home has one computer room but it is not in used. There are 17 computers and 8 printers received from the Social Work Department recently, but only 5 computers and 2 printers are allocated to the youths. The home has no internet connection. Besides that there is no qualified teacher to teach computer skills, and most of the youth learn on their own.

Home 2 (STB): This home is for male youths aged below 18, and they are placed here for three years (or less) under cases of either court order, criminal or request by family. There are only 26 youths at the home and only one goes to school. The youths’ literacy level is from high to low. About 5 of them cannot read, and some can read but with help. In terms of computer facilities, this home has one computer room with old computers that are not working properly. At the time of visit, there were 25 new computers just delivered by the state Social Welfare Department, however, only 10 computers are needed to fill up the computer room. Furthermore, there is no permanent teacher to teach ICT skills to the youths. In terms of computer used, the youths are not accessible to internet, and if there is any training on Internet in the future, the administrators indicated that a close supervision will be needed to control the wrong-used of Internet.

Home 3 (RKKA): This home is for female youths aged from 13 to 18, and they are temporarily placed here until the family is willing to take them back or a suitable home is found for them. They are placed here because they are orphaned, abundant kids, abused and neglected kids, kids of criminals, and kids who fall under Section 17 (1) Children Act 2001. There are 221 youths in this home and 120 of them go to school. Those who do not go to school attend vocational programs in the home or nearby vocational centers organized by the home itself or MLVK. In terms of computer facilities, there are only two computers with internet access that are available for the youths to use. These computers are situated in the office for a close supervision by the social workers. Two computers are not sufficient for 120 students especially when they have a lot of assignments that need them to search internet and to use Word processor. However, only youths who are schooling are allowed to use the computers. There is no qualified teacher to teach them computer skills.

Home 4 (TSPBG): This home is for female youths aged below 18, and they are placed here for three years or less under court order (immoral activities), request by family, need immediate protection or illegitimate pregnancy. There are 127 youths in this home and only seven of them attend school, whereas 55 of them who will be sitting for public examinations, do not go to school but learn on their own. Vocational training is also given to prepare them to be independent when they leave this home. In terms of computer facilities, there was a computer room but because of the obsolete computers, the room is used for other activities.

Home 5 (RBLL): This home is occupied by male youths aged between 13 to 17, and they are placed here because of court order or under
Section 80, Children Act 2001 – immediate protection. They will be in this home for three years or less. There are 45 youths with mixed literacy ability, and all of them are compulsory to attend school. In terms of computer facilities, this home has one computer laboratory with 20 computers. However, only 15 computers are in use. The youths use the computers with close supervision by the supervisor and teacher. There is one ICT officer in charge in the laboratory. This home provides ICT classes for the youths every Sunday. In addition, the lab has internet access using STREAMIX broadband and youths are able to access websites organized by the administration center such as Melaka.net and JKM.net. The computer facilities in this home are more advanced than the other four homes and it has a qualified teacher to teach computer skills and basic programs that the youths can apply when they leave this home.

b) Level of awareness

This study found that the administrators’ level of awareness towards the use of ICT among the youths from the five homes is high. They indicated that these youths should be trained to use ICT because there is a demand for ICT skills outside the homes and youth can use the skills for employment. Many of them pointed out that the lack of ICT facilities hinder the youths to learn on how to use computers. The facilities indicated by them are the computers, the learning module, the trainer/teacher, and also a space for computers. According to four of them, not only that they need new computers, they also need new programs or software that may help the youths to upgrade themselves before they leave the homes. Furthermore, the trainers to train these youth are vital. Most youths are computer illiterate, and they need basic computer skills. According to the administrators, although some of them know how to use computers, but a proper training, such as on how to use Word Processors or to use certain programs like Photoshop and others, is important. Four of the homes have no qualified teacher to train the youth with the latest computer programs or software.

c) ICT training needed for the youths

From the interviews, all administrators feel that a good selected ICT training program to cater the needs of youths should be developed. The needs for each home are different. For example, the administrator from Home 1 and Home 2 indicated that programs like learn how to read would be useful to encourage the youths to learn to read. This is because these youths have no proper education and many are illiterate. They do not have the opportunity to go to school both during the rehabilitation period and also after they are released from there. Therefore, this ICT program that focused on literacy will give them a chance to improve themselves. Another example is from Home 3, Home 4 and Home 5. The administrators indicated that the youths need ICT programs which can train them specific skills for them to utilize and to generate income when they leave the homes. For example programs like Photoshop, which will help them to create banners.

5 Recommendations

The youth group age 12-25 years old are the leaders of tomorrow and the solid foundation for the growth of a nation. Youth is also in an age group of generation who like to try new things and capable for drastic decision makings which leads to positive and negative outcomes. They are those who fancy and attracted to ICT and new technology and the trendsetter at tomorrow’s technology applications.

At-risk youth are those who are involved in minor crime and juvenile delinquency. They are placed at the rehabilitation centers with the court decision or by request of parents or those without guardian and care.

5.1 Factors for successful ICT implementation

We would like to recommend based on our research, successful ICT implementation for youth at risk-age group factors below should be met.

1. Programs should meet their needs. Needs analysis must be done to identify age, gender, location, background
2. Creative and innovative program. Challenging and interesting for target group to spend hours in the lab and keep them away from miscellaneous activities.

5.2 Value added
Morally and economically, the lab work and computer programs introduced should instill spirit of group dynamics, leadership and ability to follow instructions. The program must also create some economic value for the target group to sustain their interest and usage of computers.

5.3 Increase Employability Value
At-risk youths are usually have to spend 3 years at a rehabilitation centre and some of them could go to school but there are few who need to spend their days at the rehabilitation centers and do vocational training. The ICT program offered such as Microsoft Office can help them to be computer savvy once they leave home. Computer maintenance and care will be able to generate income for them. Pre requisite computer courses can also be offered to them so upon leaving, they can continue studying at a community college to take the actual ICT courses and obtain Certificate or Diploma.

5.4 Support
Community support, parents and industry need to ensure youth at risk after leaving and getting into mainstream will be accepted and able to continue schooling or secure jobs. Simple ICT applications using icons for programming, new and innovative programs for the Malaysian at-risk youth programs can be offered. Program must be tailored to the target group’s needs and literacy with added value of lifelong learning.

5.5 Safety and Precautions
The use of Internet and computer mediated communication such as e-mails and chats even though convenient and perfectly pose no problems for normal population must be introduced with care for the target group. This is due to the fact some of the youth at risk are placed in the home via court orders and the avenue to communicate with outsiders can also be perceived negatively.

6 Conclusion
Thus, in order to ensure that Malaysian at-risk youths are able to reap the benefits of ICT applications as their rehabilitation centers proper care and programs must be tailored for them. Factors such as youth background and needs, added value programs, higher employability values and continuous support from the community and the industry can be at great assistance and indicators of success.

References: