

Reading Habits and Obstacles Faced by School Children in the Northern and Eastern Provinces in Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

Reading occupies a pivotal role in the life of a man. Reading opens the doors of the treasures of knowledge. Reading is one of the most important components of our language and it is an essential tool for lifelong learning for all learners. In order to face the 21st century, education has to prepare these learners to adapt to social and technological changes that are taking place at an unprecedented rate. In this context, reading is a resource for continued education, for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, for gaining information through media, especially newspapers, books, radio, television and computers. Reading habits are well-planned and deliberate pattern of study which has attained a form of consistency on the part of students toward understanding academic subjects and passing at examinations. Both reading and academic achievements are interrelated and dependent on each other. Students often come from different environments and localities with different levels of academic achievement. Therefore, they differ in the pattern of reading habits (Bashir & Matto, 2012). Reading which a long-term habit starting at very early ages is the prominent gateway to the knowledge room. It can be assumed as a practice that assists individuals to gain creativeness and develops their critical thinking capacities. In this sense, reading habit is an important tool for the development of personalities and mental capacities of individuals. In addition to personal and mental developments, reading is an access to social, economic and civic life (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). In Sri Lanka education has been provided free of charge from kindergarten to university level since mid-1940s and is given in the mother tongue of the pupil. The constitution of Sri Lanka treats education as a fundamental right, making primary education compulsory for children aged five year and above. Therefore, reading and reading habits play an important role in Sri Lankan education system. Generally reading and reading habits are used to decide different attribute of the readers.

National Library and Documentation Services Board (NLDSB) conducted this survey with the objective of understanding the situation of reading habit of school children in Sri Lanka. The first stage of this survey was conducted in other provinces except the Northern and Eastern provinces in 2010.

This survey conducted in the Northern and Eastern provinces is the second stage on the survey. This is the first survey conducted on reading habits of school children after the war situation that prevailed in the Northern and Eastern provinces. People of the Northern and Eastern provinces

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suffered due to the conflict situation for more than three decades. Presently peace has been restored in these areas and this is a good opportunity for expediting the socio economic and educational development. This survey is very important because it helps to understand the situation of reading habits and plan solutions to the problems related to reading habits and library facilities in the Northern and Eastern provinces in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The survey research method was used for this study. This study was based on the latest information revealed from the survey on Reading Habits of School Children in Northern and Eastern Provinces conducted by National Library and Documentation Services Board (NLDSB) in 2016. The primary sampling units (the schools) were selected randomly stratified by sector, location of the school (urban, rural and estate sector), ethnicity (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims), category of school (girls, boys, mixed/grade of schools) and the number of students. Secondly students were selected randomly with probability proportion to size on the basis of Grades. Altogether 2240 students (grade 6 & above) were selected for the survey from 106 schools in eight districts in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Data collection was done by survey research method using structured questionnaire done by trained National Library staff members and teacher-librarians in the relevant areas. Data analysis was done by the author using Microsoft Excel.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading and academic achievement are essential for research workers and educationists to know how every child whether he or she is gifted, average, normal or backward should be educated in his or her own way. However, if he or she possesses good study habits, he or she can perform well in academic and in every other situation. It is the reading habit which helps the learner in obtaining meaningful and desirable knowledge. Good reading habits act as a strong weapon for the students to excel in life (Bashir &Mattoo, 2012). A lot of researchers like Ogbodo (2002), Bhan & Gupta (2010), and Singh (2011) have done much work on reading, especially how it affects the academic performance of students. However, most of these works pertain to the international community.

Few researches conducted by Ward, (1997), Agbezree, (2001) in Ghana were limited to primary and secondary levels of education. Higginbotham (1999), examined the reading interests of middle school-sixth, seventh, and eighth grade-students in a metropolitan, public school located in the South Eastern State Atlanta, Georgia. The result of this study showed differences in interest by gender, which is congruent with many society's stereotypes, and females reported a stronger interest in Romance, Friendship, Animal Stories, Adventure, and Historical Fiction, while the males reported stronger preferences for the categories of Sports and Science. Also, the male respondents had a stronger preference for non-fiction than did the female respondents.

Bhan and Gupta (2010) on the other hand examined study habits and academic achievement among the students belonging to scheduled caste and non-scheduled caste groups. The results revealed that sex has no significant impact on the study habits and academic achievement of students. Singh (2011) examined academic achievement and study habits of higher secondary students. The study was conducted on hundred (100) higher secondary students randomly from two higher secondary schools. The result indicates that girls and boys differ significantly in their

study habits and academic achievement. Guthrie, Benneth & McGough, (2007) believe that “reading” is the act of getting meaning from printed or written words, which is the basis for learning and one of the most important skills in everyday life. Issa et al 2012 further explain that reading is usually associated with books as only the written words provide a complete picture of the act of reading. It means that through reading, the individual is able to build or fix things, enjoy stories, discover what others believe and develop ideas or beliefs of their own. Thus, reading provides the key to all forms of information necessary for our day-to-day survival and growth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Basic Information and Demographic Characteristics of the Study and Students

According to the survey considering gender distribution of the students in the sample majority of the respondents are female which account for 50.72% of the total while 48.70% of the respondents are male. Data regarding the religion of the majority of the respondents are Hinduism (48.2%). A noticeable rate of Islamic 30% from the total can also be identified. The rate of Buddhist respondents is 12% from the total and others are Catholics. The reason behind this fact is that the research was conducted in Northern and Eastern provinces in Sri Lanka. The survey was conducted among school children and hence it is clear that the average age of the respondents is 14.28 years. Minimum age of the respondents have been recorded as 10 while owing to the above situation the maximum age has been recorded as 20years.

Questions were raised regarding the speaking and writing ability of the respondent students in different languages. In Sri Lanka ethnicity, religion and language are closely related to each other. Language proficiency of student was also explored. 53.8% of all students were capable of speaking Tamil only and 6.9% of the students could handle all three languages including Tamil, Sinhala and English. However, the Sinhala language handling accuracy among the Tamil was very poor. This drawback automatically creates a language barrier among students causing language obstacles. Students comprising 32.4% of the total were capable of writing both in English and Tamil. It should be noticed that 25.6% of the respondent students were capable of writing in all the three languages while 53 have not mentioned their response regarding their ability to write in all the three languages.

Reading Material and Reading Habits

Data was gathered regarding the language used by the respondents with most numbers of students reading in Tamil (86.3%) and the least number of the students reading in Sinhala (12.22%) and English (1.43%). In this study we noticed that the respondents’ preference to different mode of media such as printing materials, television, radio and computer related items. Majority of the respondents gave their first priority to the printing materials (49%). According to the data, school students in the Northern and Eastern provinces preferred to read books: academic, religious, reference books, novels and short stories, Magazines, CDs, internet web pages and other reading materials were also preferred to get pleasure through reading as well as to enhance their learning for life and to gain and construct new knowledge.

Therefore students’ responses indicate that their reading habit is mainly confined to books. In this study over 500 names of books were given by both Tamil and Sinhala students in all grades in two provinces. Ramayanaya, Mahabaratham, Thennaliraman, Madolduwa, Gamperaliya, Ambayaluwo

and Amma were very popular books among students. Sothi, Martin Wickramasinghe, KumarathungaMunidasa, Bharathithasan, Barathiyar and Abdul Kalam were very popular authors (Local and Foreign) among students irrespective of the grade of the student and province. The data reflected that the majority of school students (77%) were continuing reading other books except text books. It is clear that students need an extra knowledge and experiences to understand text books.

Figure 01 illustrates data regarding the number of hours spent by students for reading other books. it is clear that the minimum time allocated by the respondents was 15 minutes while the maximum time was 600m (9 hours) and the average time spent was 142 minutes. The study queried the students' preference of using the library. Majority of the students selected School library as the source of obtaining reading materials as their first preference (86.0%). Second preference was Class library (42.7%) and others are Book corner (23.4%), Box of books.

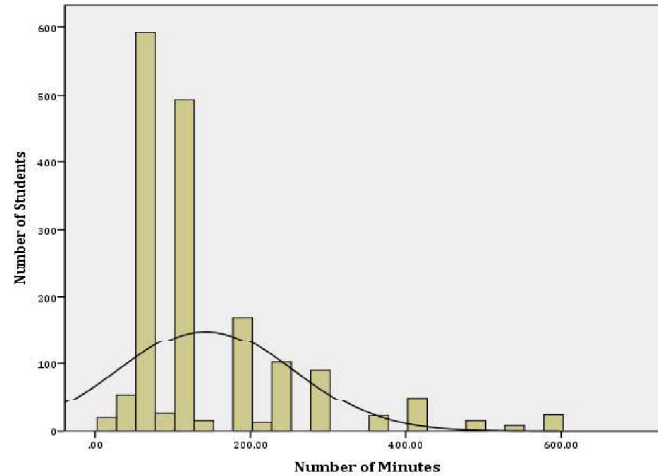


Figure 1: Number of Hours Spent by Respondents
(Source: Survey on Reading Habits of School Children, 2016)

Public library (68.1%), children society library (28.8%) and young society library (18.6%) are other libraries in addition to the school library used by students. Therefore we need to pay attention to develop the school library system.

Students' Attitudes on Reading

In response to the questions regarding the purposes of reading, the majority of students identified improving knowledge as their first purpose (51.3%), second purpose was passing examinations through reading (37.7%) and the third one was for fun and getting entertainment. We considered their other purposes of reading books in the library. They used the library for doing creative works, for competitions, for learning and relaxation. The study gathered data regarding different attitudes toward reading among the respondents. Majority of the respondents agreed that reading is more important than having fun with friends (84.1%) and the significant thing is that students agreed that reading gave them happiness (89.5%) also 73.7% of the total disagreed that reading was tiresome.

Obtaining Reading Materials

In this study we asked the respondents about the different ways of obtaining reading material they required. Students' first preference of obtaining their reading materials was from the library. It accounted for 60.2%. Their second and third preferences were obtaining the books from friends and family members. The study considered about other ways of obtaining reading materials required by them and the relevant data pertaining to their needs from their relatives and siblings.

Reading Environment and Obstacles for Reading

Questions were raised from the respondents about the obstacles that they faced with regard to reading environment. According to data thus collected, majority of the respondents mentioned their first obstacle as insufficiency of time for reading (27.5%). When analyzing the second preference of the respondents, it was found that the majority again selected insufficiency of time for reading and it accounted for 22.3% of the total. That was the major obstacle they faced in their reading environment. Students also mentioned that language barrier, economic barriers, insufficiency of reading materials and some difficulties in the home environment as the other problems they faced when reading. When questions were raised about reasons for not purchasing reading materials majority of the students mentioned finance difficulties as the main reason. The Northern and Eastern provinces had different types of economic, social, educational and health issues due to the war situation.

It was critically ineffective to the change of lifestyle of people of the Northern and Eastern provinces. Those barriers always reflected their lives and the study provides suggestions for encouraging students' interest in reading.

Table 1: Support for Encouraging Respondents' Interest in Reading

Activity	Yes	No	AING	Total
Having a reading group	1622 (72.6%)	515 (23.1%)	97 (4.3%)	2234 (100%)
Books being printed attractively	1593 (71.3%)	511 (22.9%)	130 (5.8%)	2234 (100%)
Having reading competitions	1933 (86.5%)	220 (9.8%)	81 (3.6%)	2234 (100%)
Do you think that having an opportunity to express your ideas about the book	1524 (68.2%)	560 (25.1%)	150 (6.7%)	2234 (100%)

Source: Survey on Reading Habits of School Children, 2016

According to the table majority that account for 86.5% of the total agreed with the fact that having reading competitions would be supportive in improving the interest for reading while the least number of respondents that account for 68.2% of the total agreed with the fact that having an opportunity to express their own ideas about the book would improve the interest for reading among the respondents. We gathered data from school children in the Northern and Eastern provinces about other ways of improving their interest for reading. The respondents agreed that celebrating the library day, having internet facilities in the school library, maintaining a good

environment around the library, library exhibitions, religious songs and using the public library would be supportive in improving their interest in reading.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion based on the survey is mainly on the different areas covered by the study. Following recommendations are proposed based on the study for implementation for the benefit of school children in Northern and Eastern provinces.

- Attitude on the importance of reading should be improved among the students through various awareness programmes.
- Encourage students to maintain a book collection at their houses. Most students have no book collection in their houses.
- The proficiency of English language among students is not adequate and this seriously affects the reading of children. Therefore, the English language proficiency of students should be improved.
- Adequate training should be provided to school librarians, teacher librarians or the teachers in charge of school libraries on library management and information technology.
- Students should be made aware of how to use the library properly through user education programmes.
- Information facilities and other library facilities should be improved and students should be motivated to use information technology tools as well as library facilities.
- Public libraries are the most utilized libraries by students apart from the school library and therefore a close link should be maintained by school libraries with the public library and thereby make aware the libraries about information needs of students.

The study has revealed very important facts relevant to the students reading and library usage. It is clear in general that school libraries in the Northern and Eastern provinces need rapid improvement. It is the duty and responsibility of the educationalists, child psychologists, teachers and parents to come out with their suggestions on improving reading habits of school children. The library system in these provinces faced serious difficulties due to the conflict situation. Therefore library resource development in school libraries, human resource development, introduction of new technology, changing of attitudes of students and information literacy development of students are needed in these areas.

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