The role of public libraries in the expansion of literacy and lifelong learning in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper defines literacy and lifelong learning and their significance to the development of a country. It specifies the recent education policy reforms in Sri Lanka which emphasise the expansion of literacy and lifelong learning. It then describes the role of the public libraries in this task and discusses the status of the Sri Lankan public libraries. Gives reasons for the unresponsiveness of public libraries to the changing educational requirements. Finally, the paper gives some recommendations which will help to develop the present condition of public libraries.

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Introduction

Literacy usually denotes the ability to read and write, but later, the attribute of functionality was added to imply the competency of using the reading and writing ability for the development of the individual as well as the community. Lifelong learning is the learning achieved throughout the life. It cannot be achieved without literacy because reading and writing is essential for learning, especially in developing countries where a considerable amount of information is still in printed media. The public library is an essential element in literacy and lifelong learning, as it is the place which provides access to learning. In a developing country like Sri Lanka, where individuals cannot afford to provide their own learning material, the public library has a significant role to play in disseminating literacy and lifelong learning. The question is whether Sri Lankan public libraries are equipped to face this challenge.

Literacy and lifelong learning

Literacy

Illiterate people were initially defined as "those over the age of 16, who have not completed the first four elementary grades or first four years of school and cannot read or write at the fourth grade level" (du Sautoy, 1966, p. 17). Later this definition was expanded to include functionality. "A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life." A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his groups and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development (UNESCO, 1986). In this manner, literacy is defined as not only the reading, writing and calculating ability, but also making use of that ability for his/her and the community's development.

> Functional literacy should be considered to be not just the process of learning and reading, writing and arithmetic skills, but a contribution to the liberation of man and to his full development (Carron and Bordia, 1985).

This does not imply that, our rich traditional society in which knowledge was handed down from generation to generation orally, was less

knowledgeable. But knowledge acquired in this manner is not sufficient for the modern society. A wealth of information related to day-to-day life and occupations have to be gained through continuous learning, and a high proportion of learning materials are contained in printed medium.

Some may believe that in the electronic age, writing is obsolete, but this is by no means true. Use of technology-based information retrieval systems does not reduce the values of literacy but increases it. The modern information retrieval actually will need a higher level of literacy and sophisticated knowledge, in order to reap the maximum benefits. Bhola (1982) contemplates that:

- We retain only 20 per cent of what we hear and only 50 per cent of what we see and hear. Illiteracy, in fact, supports the spread of misinformation since messages have been distorted anywhere from 29 per cent to 57 per cent, depending on the complexity of the message, when handled by illiterates.
- Broadcast media do not help people to become independent consumers of information.
- The listener and the viewer have no control over media. Print media are much more amenable to user control than radio and television.

Literacy in Sri Lanka

The Literacy rate in Sri Lanka was 92 per cent in 1996/1997 (Central Bank, 1999) and this is closer to that of the industrial countries. This high literacy rate can be attributed to the free education policy of the successive governments of Sri Lanka since independence.

Although statistically, literacy is not a fundamental problem in Sri Lanka, as in some of the other developing countries, we should not brush aside the problem of illiteracy easily. The criterion used to determine the literacy of a person in the Central Bank survey was the ability to write a name and address and to read and understand a simple sentence. The literacy of persons aged five years and above was considered in the survey (Central Bank, 1999, p. 37). This is not the functional literacy, but the reading and writing ability at the very basic level. We must aim at a higher adult functional literacy rate, because a literate population has a greater aptitude to use information and

participate successfully in national development programmes. Whitlam (1990) asserts that low literacy skills are costing Australia $3.2 billion a year in lost productivity and that figure could be much higher if it took into account the increased costs of industrial safety, poor product quality and low job mobility. Sri Lanka has yet to calculate its lost production owing to low literacy rate.

According to the National Education Commission (NEC), the average non-school attendance of 5-14-year-olds is 14 per cent. If we consider those who do not attend school as illiterates, this is a considerable figure. This same document claims that there are pockets in which the non-school attending percentage is very much higher (NEC, 1997). Data on adults who relapse into illiteracy is absent in Sri Lanka. Therefore, we can assume that the functional literacy rate of the labour force is much lower than the given figure.

Lifelong learning

The complex environment confronted with rapid change places a constant burden on the individual to acquire a multiplicity of skills and knowledge irrespective of their age, social, political or economic status. Learning today is not a luxury limited only to the elite, but a commodity essential for survival.

Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve an increase in skills, knowledge, underlying values or the capacity to reflect. Effective learning will lead to change development and a desire to learn more. Lifelong learning is from pre-nursery to post-retirement – womb-to-tomb learning (Shepherd, 1998)

Lifelong learning is important because continuous learning is essential for survival in a changing world. According to the formula L> C where L is the rate of learning and C is the rate of change, individuals who are not learning individuals will be excluded, disadvantaged and will become disaffected. Organisations, which are not learning organisations, will fail. (Shepherd 1998)

Development

African scholar, Omo-Fadaka (1982), takes the viewpoint that not only the definition of development based on gross national product (GNP) is wrong, but the means of achieving it

(through industrialisation, urban-based mechanised and capital-intensive agriculture, heavy foreign investments through multinationals, stepped up foreign aid, high priority for formal education) are also wrong. The resulting political, social and economic problems are critical. He sees the increased dependence on external economic relations, high foreign debts, persistent poverty and mass underdevelopment, low labour productivity, wide and increasing disparities in the distribution of income and wealth between the elite and the mass of workers and rural peasants and a crisis in the formal education system as results of this wrong approach to development.

As a measure of achieving development, most African countries have resorted to rural development strategy. Rural development implies genuine and lasting rural regeneration and transformation of the workers and peasantry, which is carried out by the efforts of the people themselves and results in the equitable distribution of social, economic, political and cultural benefits (Newa, 1990, p. 75).

Relevance of literacy for development
As Newa points out, the real implementers of rural development are the rural people themselves and illiteracy is a barrier to achieve this. The people need to acquire new skills, new attitudes and new technology and literacy is the primary tool in this acquisition process. The perceptions that illiteracy is an obstacle for rural development and that it must be a component of rural development and also that literacy is a form of investment have resulted in functional literacy campaigns in most African countries. Bhola (1982) observes that there are changes in the attitudes of new literates. They have a higher level of individual modernity and are consequently better adopters of innovation and more effective handlers of information.

About 70 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka belongs to the rural category. The adverse effects of development by means of industrialisation and urban-based mechanised agriculture, etc., are perceptible in Sri Lanka. Therefore, Sri Lankan policy-makers should concentrate on the rural participatory development, taking the African countries as an example. If rural masses are developed it will be easier to achieve national development but this will require development of

functional literacy of the Sri Lankan rural masses.

In the Sri Lankan context, print media can reach the multitude in rural as well as urban areas where infrastructural facilities for other electronic media are not developed. It also can reach the low-income populace at an affordable cost rather than the high-cost electronic media, which they cannot afford. Functional literacy is the foundation of lifelong learning by which the rural/urban masses are emancipates from poverty.

National education policies on literacy and lifelong learning
The Sri Lankan Government has realised the gravity of illiteracy and static learning although rural participatory development is not emphasised in Sri Lanka to the extent it is done in African countries. Hence the new education policy reforms have paid attention to the development of literacy and lifelong learning. There are four recommendations in the General Education Reforms (NEC, 1997) which concentrates on these two concepts. *(Numbers within parentheses refer to the actual policy recommendations.)*

(1) implementation of strategies to bring non-school-going children within the formal and non-formal education system (1.3);
(2) provision of alternative education opportunities through the literary centres, activity schools and open school (1.4);
(3) development of curriculum, learning/teaching resources materials and training of pre-school teachers and care givers (2.1.2-2.1.4);
(4) Early childhood development awareness programmes for mothers on home-based learning by NGOs and local community leaders (2.1.5).

The National Policy on Technical and Vocational Education (NEC, 1996) emphasises the necessity of lifelong learning. Educational attainments of technical and vocational education sector students vary from non-starters with minimum level literacy and school drop-outs to those who have sat/passed GCE/OL and those who sat GCE/AL and failed to gain admission to the universities.

The self-employed in the above sector account for nearly 27 per cent of the labour force and the formal training programmes in

the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector will not satisfy the multifarious requirements of the self-employed. They have to be entrepreneurial in their orientation. They must posses a package of skills for managing their activities, knowledge of markets and capacity to respond to market changes, ability to manage simple accounts and budgeting and information which will provide them with access to credit, technology and government programmes relevant to their activity. This can be achieved by non-formal education and extension programmes of government agencies and NGOs and assuring them support in times of need to solve their problems (NEC, 1996).

In addition to other training institutions, the Non-formal Education Branch of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education conducts TVET in schools during afternoons and weekends utilising the facilities in the formal education system.

The following selection of recommendations of the National Policy on TVET (NEC, 1997) implies that those who are engaged in technical and vocational sector occupations need to achieve continuing professional development (lifelong learning in another sense) in their chosen vocations and crafts. It is needless to say that the craftsmen without literacy cannot achieve lifelong learning today. On the other hand, the functional literacy requirements of those who need to upgrade their competencies from a non-skilled level to a skilled level cannot be ignored. *(Numbers within parentheses refer to the actual policy recommendations.)*

- a national award system to appreciate, motivate and recognise skilled practitioners has to be instituted (6.4.1);
- associations in crafts should be formed to promote the recognition of these skills (6.4.2);
- new training centres in provinces with the assistance of provincial councils and the private sector should be established (6.5.1);
- to provide a valid certification for TVET this will enable the students to transfer to more advanced courses after completing one course (6.8.1);
- establishment of a labour market information system (LMIS), to provide information and data on available job opportunities and future trends (6.9.1);

- there is a need for R&D work in adapting modern technologies to suit the local needs (6.10.1).

The key concepts which runs through the policy reforms are expansions of educational opportunities through increased participation by all groups, lifelong learning, student-centred learning instead of teacher-centred learning practised so far, emphasis on technical and practical skills which are suitable for the current employment requirements and increased use of information and communications technology.

Yet, it is interesting to note that none of the policy reforms mention how they expect to provide access to learning in the non-formal education sector. A well-planned school library development project is undergoing with the assistance of the World Bank. But there is no reference to the provision of library facilities in the proposed literacy centres, Activity Schools and the Open School. Though the importance of R&D is highlighted, there is no reference to the library facilities in the R&D organisations or in the other training centres.

The questions of what facilities should be available for the students to continue their education, whether they can afford to provide their own basic learning materials and whether it is possible for them to achieve comprehensive learning individually, have escaped the minds of the policy makers. It is unfortunate that they failed to recognise the role of the public library.

The public library

The public library is the local centre of information, making all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users. Specific services and materials must be provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials; for example, linguistic minorities, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison. All age groups must find material relevant to their needs. Collections and services have to include all types of appropriate media and modern technologies as well as traditional materials. High quality and relevance to local needs and conditions are fundamental. Material must reflect current trends and the evolution of society, as

well as the memory of human endeavour and imagination. Collections and services should not be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship, nor commercial pressures (UNESCO, 1994).

Missions of the public library

According to the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994) the following 12 key missions, which relate to information, literacy, education and culture should be at the core of public library services:

(1) creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age;
(2) supporting both individual and self-conducted education as well as formal education at all levels;
(3) providing opportunities for personal creative development;
(4) stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people;
(5) promoting awareness of cultural heritage, appreciation of the arts, scientific achievements;
(6) providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts;
(7) fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favouring cultural diversity;
(8) supporting the oral tradition;
(9) ensuring access for citizens to all sorts of community information;
(10) providing adequate information services to local enterprises, associations and interest groups;
(11) facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills; and
(12) supporting and participating in literacy activities and programmes for all age groups, and initiating such activities if necessary.

The role of the public library in literacy education and lifelong learning

Literacy and lifelong learning cannot exist in a vacuum. Expansion of literacy needs reading and writing material. The neo-literates need a place to practice and develop their newly-acquired skill. On the other hand, in the absence of a literary environment, which will encourage them to make use of their skill, there is the danger of a relapse in to illiteracy by the neo-literates.

Though lifelong learning is essential for survival today, what means do learners have to obtain their lifelong learning? Where would

they turn to for the learning material? Especially in a developing country like Sri Lanka, where cost of learning material (mainly books) is too high for the majority of the population, the public library can play a significant role in providing learning material to support literacy as well as the continuing education process of the general public.

The ways in which public libraries can contribute towards expansion of literacy and lifelong learning are many, and examples are numerous from all over the world.

Gibbs (1990) points out that Australian public libraries have intervened on two levels. At the bottom level a separate literacy collection could be provided for the literacy students and teachers. This is not far removed from the traditional library services. At a much higher level, libraries have intervened more directly by managing and supporting literacy programmes. It varies from provision of space for classes, one-to-one training and a library staff member participating in a literacy group to the library managing all aspects of literacy programmes. This will include provision of space as well as employing of tutors

The term "Library" implies literacy. "Those who are not literate do not have anything to do with the libraries" is the common opinion. If the public library is to participate successfully in the literacy programmes, this perspective must be eradicated. A variety of non-print media (posters, pictures, cartoons, banners, films and videos) can be used to attract the non-literates to the library so that they will gradually overcome the fear of literary environments and want to learn more by improving their reading and writing skills.

Developing literacy centres based on public libraries will be cost effective in the Sri Lankan context where resources are limited. Taking the Australian context as a model, literacy trainers could be identified to work from the public library. In this way the space of the library could be used to conduct classes and the learning materials can be organised without much additional cost. On the other hand, when the literacy students visit the library for classes they will gradually learn to use the material in the library to practice their new skill. This will prevent the relapse into illiteracy.

As Newa maintains:

A village library which is fully integrated with the literacy and post-literacy educational programme, if staffed with an imaginative librarian, can go further by providing remedial reading, personal counselling advocacy or referral. If the librarian collaborates with the literacy teacher and the rural extension agents, which he should, the use of the library materials for literacy and vocational or coping skills development and even for everyday problem-solving information, will be immense. Thus a village librarian becomes also a functional literacy tutor and change agent, and the village library becomes the village education and information centre (Newa, 1990, p. 84).

The public library can contribute to the lifelong learning by supporting the learners to identify and locate the reading material (perhaps listening and viewing material as well) relevant to the needs of the community. The library can identify the needs of the community by studying the main occupations of the area, agricultural products, major industries, crafts and vocations particular to that area, and the characteristics of the population. i.e. certain areas produce tea, rubber or coconut. In certain areas there are specific industries like aquaculture, or garment factories. These specific characteristics produce sub-cultures relevant to a particular area. The public library must cater to the lifelong learning requirements of these sub cultures.

Apart from providing learning material, public libraries can provide a SDI (Selective Dissemination of Information) for the lifelong learning of the local community, e.g. in a region where brass industry is common, the public library can provide useful information in SDI form. Newspaper cuttings, trade opportunities, product designs, market survey information, insurance and safety measures will be appreciated by the users. This kind of service is usually provided by a special library, but in Sri Lanka, the special libraries which provide industrial information are located only in Colombo, the capital city. Therefore, the public librarian's attempt to provide career-related information to the local community will be much appreciated by the less-educated people of the community who are not familiar with obtaining information from the city libraries.

According to Williams (1995), a solution relying on more of the same, more books, more staff, more space, more equipment or perhaps even more opening hours, to do more of what is currently being done is not a real solution. He suggests significant upgrades of networking among libraries. Co-operation could be used to develop comprehensive collections regionally instead of every library attempting to possess everything. A network of public libraries can be used to share the resources.

Provision of computer literacy is another aspect on which public libraries can concentrate. Although use of computers has become an everyday affair in the urban areas, there are people who have not even set their eyes on a computer, in rural areas. The public library can not only provide computer literacy to the library users, but also can provide the computer-based services to them. The proposed LMIS will require computer literacy of those who are in the technical and vocational education sector.

Establishing a nation-wide digital network of public libraries can exploit the resources of the other libraries, so that the access to learning resources can be expanded. In the UK, the significance of the public library in lifelong learning was realised and there are proposals made for the development of a public library electronic network, targeting connection of most public libraries to the network by 2002. A mixture of organisations consisting of the government, local authorities and private organisations are funding the network infrastructure (Shepherd, 1998).

Public libraries in Sri Lanka

In the Sri Lankan context so far, public libraries have been insensitive to the needs of the community. The major function of the public library is provision of reading material to the literates. The illiterates are not yet considered as potential users of the library facilities. Catering for lifelong learning of the community is not considered a primary duty.

In recent history there are two occasions in which literacy and lifelong learning was given priority in public libraries.

Panditaratne (1985) describes a pilot project where literacy, and lifelong learning were taken into consideration a long time before they became buzzwords. In 1972, with the assistance of UNESCO, (then) Ceylon National Library Services Board, Department of Education and the Department of Local Government, this project was launched in the Kandy public library. One of the main

objectives of this project was the creation and promotion of a reading habit of the people. Readers' clubs were created and a book box scheme was started in addition to the reorganisation of 45 public and school libraries in the Kandy region. According to Panditaratne, this pilot project has been successful and he had stated that this programme would be continued so that, in the near future, Sri Lanka would have a network of well-planned public and school libraries in the rural areas. Yet we know that this goal was not achieved.

Another example can be found in the near history of public libraries. Karunawathie (1998) has given an excellent example of how the Negombo Public Library has contributed to the community in which it exists. In Negombo, where the fishing industry is one of the main occupations, the public library has assisted the fishing community in the changing process of their fishing technology as well as in conservation of fish stock. She further mentions the way the library was used to disseminate information on protecting the environment, especially the mangroves threatened by human activities. If public libraries in agricultural areas can act in a similar manner to develop the knowledge of the farmers, so that their stock is preserved or marketed through proper avenues instead of wasted, it will be an invaluable contribution to the lifelong learning of the local agricultural community. But unfortunately, this does not happen.

Why Sri Lankan public libraries have been unresponsive

The method of learning in ancient Sri Lanka was the oral tradition. Buddhist scholars read the canonical scriptures to the laymen from the monastery's library, which was known as "Poth Gula". The lay individuals did not handle books. The "Pus Kola Poth" (manuscripts written on processed palm leaves) were treated as sacred. According to Piyadasa (1985), this may have caused the Sinhala public to turn to the audio medium as the primary source of information instead of the printed medium, even long after the monastic period.

The first public libraries in Sri Lanka were established during the colonial period and their primary objective was to serve the literary needs of the expatriates and the English educated élite. The concept of the public library was imported from the West, where illiteracy or reading habit was not a major problem. The very first public library manifesto of UNESCO (1949) stressed the services for education (for already functional literates). Sri Lankan public libraries established under these circumstances were not sensitive to the local requirements. On the other hand, the general public who did not have an extensive reading habit did not impose pressure on the Sri Lankan public library.

The education system of Sri Lanka, which existed since independence, was more teacher-centred than student-centred. It therefore did not inculcate the reading habit and independent learning habit among the students. Hence the possibility of lifelong learning through libraries was not recognised by the public as well as the Sri Lankan policy-makers.

At present, public libraries do not come under a portfolio of a minister, but function under local authorities. Since there is no recognition as a mandatory service, the success or failure of these libraries depend on the financial status of the local authority and the attitudes of the members towards the library service (Vidanapathirana, 1997, p. 17). This indicates that the public libraries in Sri Lanka exist as a "nobody's child". No government authority has taken the public libraries seriously to consider its development.

There are numerous inherent shortcomings in the public library system as a result of this condition. Obviously, financial resources are scarce. Lack of training opportunities has affected the knowledge and skills of the public library staff. Information sources have rarely gone beyond the printed medium. Information technology is still alien to most of the public libraries and attitudes of the public as well as the authorities are negative towards the public library service.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Sri Lanka Library Association (SLLA), as the sole professional body, should make a representation to the government authorities and policy makers on behalf of the public libraries, indicating the potential contribution of the public libraries towards literacy and lifelong learning.

The SLLA should emphasise that public libraries should be taken under the wing of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, under which most of the other libraries exists; so that there will be proper co-ordination between the non-formal education section of the ministry and the public library service. Public library services should be developed within a framework of national strategies for information and culture. However, strategies cannot stand-alone and will not themselves provide efficient and rational library development as such. The 1994 manifesto therefore, is in favour of specific library legislation (Niegaard, 1994).

Design of a public library policy and standards is crucial for the rediscovery of the future path of the public libraries. SLLA has a significant role to play in implementing this.

Public librarians need to change their attitudes to be more appreciative of the literacy training and lifelong learning needs of the community. This will enable them to change the current pattern of library services to the illiterate community.

There is a responsibility for the library and information science education and training organisations to make the Sri Lankan librarians aware of the significance of these concepts through their education programmes.

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