

Challenges Faced by the Sri Lankan School Libraries in the Period of Covid and the Current Economic Crisis: Special Reference to the Western Province School Libraries

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Abstract: *Sri Lanka is an island which has a school going population of 4.2 million students and 23592 teachers, distributed among 10155 schools throughout the nation. The main objective of this study was to explore how the Sri Lankan school libraries, especially those in the western province, managed the challenges faced during the Covid phase and also during the years 2020-2022, owing to the prevailing economic crisis. By the year 2022 Sri Lanka was facing a severe economic crisis as a result of the depletion of the country's foreign reserves, which resulted in the shortages of food, fuel, medication, cement, and other essential items. The school libraries too faced many challenging issues due to the economic crisis, with regard to the purchasing of books and reading materials and the training of staff. Therefore, a program was organized for a group of students in the Western Province so as to encourage them to read and develop their skills in creative writing and critical thinking.*

Keywords: *School Libraries, Reading promotion digitally, Covid 19 and school libraries, School library development*

Introduction

Sri Lanka is an Island in South Asia having an area of 65610 Km², and located very close to India. According to the annual school census of Sri Lanka carried out in 2020, there are

around 10155 schools in the island with a school going population of 4.2 million students, and 235924 teachers. In addition to the government schools there are 736 Buddhist Pirivena (Religious) schools, and 104 private schools, with a total student population of 127968. All the schools have their own libraries but at different levels. According to Kuruppuarachchi (2009), 4000 school libraries were developed in Sri Lanka under the General Education Project 2 (GEP-2), by providing the necessary facilities. Two thousand teacher librarians were recruited from the newly passed out graduates and 4000 school librarians were trained for the school libraries.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to explore how the Sri Lankan school libraries especially those in the western province, faced the challenges during the Covid phase and also from the year 2020-2022, as a result of the current economic crisis; and how the challenges have been managed by the Education officers and the teachers. By the year 2022 Sri Lanka was facing a severe economic crisis as a result of the depletion of the country's foreign reserves, which resulted in the shortages of food, fuel, medication, cement, and other essential items (Sharma, et.al. 2022). As a result, the school libraries too faced many challenging issues with regard to the purchasing of books and reading materials and training of staff. The importance of the school library and its activities have been elaborated on by many scholars and researchers. According to Akande and Bamise, (2017) school libraries are considered as the powerhouse of an educational institution. They have further emphasized that any educational institution without a library is as lifeless as a motor car without an engine or a body without a soul.

The Library Programs

Because of the Covid 19 pandemic all the school libraries and the schools in Sri Lanka were closed for over two years from time to time. Therefore, the teachers used zoom and other applications to teach the subject contents online. As a result, the reading habits and the library usage of the students became very poor. By this time as a remedial measure, the students were asked to engage in the reading promotional activities digitally. These programs

were digital storytelling, one-on-one friendly chats with students, poster competitions, and creative writing for young ones.

Most students attending the government schools in Sri Lanka access books from the school library or from a public library. Due to the covid pandemic the reading habit among the students was severely affected due to the closure of schools, public libraries and also due to social distancing protocols. As a result, the creative and critical thinking of the students took a heavy toll as their life centered around online teaching, which no doubt enhanced their knowledge but did little to sharpen their skills. Therefore, a program was organized for a group of school students selected from grades 6 to 11 in the 11 educational zones of the Western Province. The main objective of the program was to encourage the students to read and develop their skills in creative writing and critical thinking.

The program included a vibrant and interactive, story-telling session by the librarian of Dharmasena Attygalle Vidyalaya, Piliyandala - Ms. Rangika Weerakkody, and an exciting movie review session under the theme of “film reading” conducted by Ms. Niroshini Fernando, the librarian of Maris Stella College, Negombo. Both sessions were followed by a very engaging and interesting Q &A session with students. Librarians shared their experience on how they started an online story-telling program for the students and created an e- Library for students of grade 3. This activity instilled a lasting positive impact on students with many students engaging in reading and creative writing even after the conclusion of online educational activities. The most exciting part of the program was when students were requested to participate in story-telling. Students of grades 5 - 7 were asked to create picture stories (cartoons) consisting of a few frames. The students of grades 8 & 9 were given the task of creating cover pages for their dream story books. The students used their creativity to portray their unique ideas onto paper and presented their stories in colorful pictures with the use of a few words to explain the story. With a donation from the Atlantic Company, certificates were distributed to all the winners. It is believed that this program has encouraged students, as well as teachers, to develop their interest in reading and creative writing, and to become more accomplished and innovative individuals. Among the projects that were initiated in the western province, the following is an example of one such project that was conducted in the “Gothatuwa Maha Vidyalaya” school in 2022, as soon as the school was reopened, and titled “Little English Library”. The main objective of the program was to

improve the English language knowledge of the students of grades 6 to 9. Following are the steps of the project.

Step 01: A collection of English story books was begun with a donation to the library, under the patronage of the Provincial Department of Education, Western Province.

Steps 02: President' s guides too were motivated to donate books and School funds were utilized to buy more books to strengthen the collection. Students too were motivated to donate books.

Step 03: Every Friday, the English periods of grades 6 to 9 classes were used to read the books in the “Little English Library” and was further developed as the “English only day program”. During these periods the students of grades 8 and 9 selected books by themselves as they desired from the library collection and engaged in self-reading. The students wrote down the new vocabulary they learned from the story books. Some students brought their dictionaries to read the books.

Step 04: Progress of the project was measured using the journal on the progress of this project.

Step 05: A Notice board for English language messages was also initiated near the library.

Conclusion

The final result indicated that these programs had encouraged students, as well as teachers, to develop their interest in reading and creative writing, and to become more accomplished and innovative individuals with critical and creative thinking skills. Teacher Librarians and In-service Advisors worked collaboratively alongside other staff members of the schools towards the success of these events. The children had immense fun and enjoyed themselves with such unrestrained joy, letting go of their reins using their imagination and creative thinking. This was an ideal way for them to interact with one another and to have fun while learning. Even though the events were conducted online during the Covid 19 pandemic period, it was an escape of sorts from their imprisonment at home and the monotony of online learning, without any extracurricular activities. Digital storytelling made a considerable impact on the children's ability to be reflective, even at such a young age, and thereby leading the children to incorporate the lessons learnt from the stories into their day to day lives and pondering upon the simple life lessons and experiences told by the stories. It was apparent

that the children were inclined to engage in many more different activities as a team and by themselves, while being rather passionate about their work as well. It was as if they had finally got a bit of much needed fresh air.

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Biographies

Dr. Prasanna Ranaweera is a Senior Lecturer attached to the National Institute of Library & Information Sciences (NILIS), University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and served as the Director of the same Institute from 2014 -2020.

Ms. L.H.W.R. Silva holds B.A, M. Ed. and MTL. She serves as the Deputy Director of Education, Provincial Department of Education, Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is the in-charge officer of the school library development projects in the Western province.