



Study of information literacy skills behind the prison wall in Sri Lanka

Chandani J G¹ and Weerasooriya WA²

¹Assistant Librarian, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka
E mail: chandani@sjp.ac.lk

²Senior Professor in Library & Information Science, Department of Library and Information Science, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
E mail: waw@kln.ac.lk

Received: 28 October 2019; revised: 11 September 2020; accepted: 13 September 2020

The study explores and recognizes the information literacy skills and the information resources used by the Sri Lankan prisoners. This study was carried out in the Welikada Prison, which is also known as the Magazine Prison: a maximum-security prison, as well as the largest prison in Sri Lanka. The survey research design was employed in the study, equipped with a simple questionnaire as the instrument. The subjects of the study were 80 male prisoners who were selected on the basis of random sampling method. The study gave birth to a number of findings with utmost importance, in relation to the information literacy skills of the inmates. Some of the major findings recommend that the prison administrators should have and maintain an effective collaboration with the prison library officers, while stressing the need of introducing a library hour for the inmates, facilitating them with adequate information sources and creating a conducive environment within the prison walls, in order to promote the access to information sources and encourage the inmates to use the information literacy skills and available resources for their betterment.

Keywords: Information literacy; Literacy skills; Information resources; Prisoners; Prison libraries; Sri Lanka

Introduction

“Literacy and education could be considered the keys to opportunity in society. Perhaps, no one realizes it better than prisoners”- A reflection of the importance of learning and literacy by an inmate of a maximum-security prison in Sri Lanka.

Information has been employed by the mankind as a tool in search of solutions to almost all the problems one grapples with, within society. Therefore, information holds a mammoth significance as a veritable instrument in a number of aspects. Thus, it demands further investigation and exploration of the information needs of individuals or specific groups in order to cater them in the constant quest for knowledge, as well as to empower individuals through the investigation of the use of information resources.

Literacy and education could be considered two of the major keys to opportunity, especially in the present society. As it is reflected by the statements of the prisoners themselves, it is the inmates who realize the significance of information, perhaps, better than many others in society. In fact, prisoners have basic information needs for two major purposes; for survival during the imprisonment and for successful preparation for the requirements of post-imprisonment. In short, a successful life after the

release could possibly be one of the major dreams the inmates hold during their imprisonment. However, it has been observed that the use of information resources by the prison inmates is deemed to be unsatisfactory in Sri Lankan prisons. The lack of information literacy skills among the prisoners and environmental factors are considered to be the root causes of this condition. However, literature reveals that the elements such as information needs, information seeking, use of information resources, literacy skills of prisoners have not yet been studied or characterized. Hence, this study is an attempt to recognize the information literacy skills of the prisoners and their use of information resources.

Literature review

Information literate individuals can recognize the need for information; can access information; evaluate the information; and creatively use that information in a socially responsible manner¹. Information literate individuals have “learned how to learn” utilizing a higher-level set of theories and abilities². Information literacy skills are an obligatory part of new western culture and the ability to access and estimate information is critical to success in both our work and personal lives³. Those who have the ability to access and manage large amounts of

information will be significant providers of knowledge to society⁴.

Definitions for information literacy (IL) date back to 1914 and there are many definitions of IL but this could be broadly described as, “knowing when and why you need information, where to find it and how to estimate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner”⁵. However, it is noteworthy that all the definitions share some common elements. Each definition mentions the possession of an integrated set of skills, knowledge of resources from which to retrieve information and the ability to analyze and use information.^{1,3,4}

By the end of the 1980s, information literacy was no longer an embryonic concept⁶. In 1989, ALA’s Presidential Committee⁷ published an authoritative report, outlining the content of the concept. The report states that to be information literate, an individual must be able to detect when information is needed and the ability to trace, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) defines information literacy as “the ability to recognize when information is needed and locate, evaluate and use effectively the needed information.”⁸ In order to encourage the addition of the individual in contemporary definitions; they advocate the inclusion of dispositions like persistence, attention to detail and caution in accepting information⁹. However, according to all definitions whether academic or personal, information literacy includes the skills, dispositions, and abilities necessary to be a productive individual in a “technologically sophisticated global society”¹⁰.

Further, a significant number of prisoners have been found to possess low literacy and inadequate employability skills. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Lehmann and Locke and Campbell in most countries around the world, the majorities of individuals who make up the prison population have limited education, poor reading and life skills, and do not come from a background where reading was a frequent or popular pursuit.^{2&6}

Prison, as a reformatory institution, and inmates being members of the larger community, should have the right to be exposed to information and knowledge for educational and training purposes, personal development, study kits and do-it-yourself tools. Most of the prisoners have low educational attainment¹¹ and

poor employability skills, as revealed by IFLA¹², therefore, there sprouts the need for further education and vocational training programmes and the availability and access of informative materials to help them find useful occupations after getting released.

According to Sussman¹³ of Carbondale Public Library, “Reading reduces recidivism, which means it increases an individual’s chance that he will succeed at living outside of prison without resorting to crime”. In a New Zealand case study involving Whanganui prison and Whanganui district library, it was mentioned that poor literacy skills correlated with low library use and other negative factors like poor health, low income, and low community involvement, all of which are characteristics that have a greater tendency of leading to criminal activity and imprisonment¹⁴.

Information is a major resource in human development as access to it could improve their knowledge¹⁵. Thus, submission of information could be considered as the heart of the world’s development. It further explains that increased access to timely, accurate, relevant, reliable and current information remains a significant precursor to technological innovations.

Objective of the Study

- To explore and identify the information literacy skills and information resources used by prison inmates in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

As far as the Sri Lankan prison system is concerned, it consists of closed prisons (2), remand prisons (18), correction centers for youthful offenders (02), a training center for youthful offenders, work camps (09), open prison camps (02), prison lockups (23), and a prison school, all of which are administered by Superintendents of Prisons. The Prison Statistics Report (2018) states that the total number of inmates in all prison institutions in Sri Lanka is about 121,869, out of which 99,036 are unconvicted prisoners, and 22,833 are convicted prisoners. The study was carried out in the Welikada Prison (Magazine Prison): the largest prison and one of the maximum-security prisons in Sri Lanka. According to the statistics (2018), out of the total convicted prisoners, about 8,868 are inmates of the Welikada Prison, while 8,570 and 298 are males and females, respectively. In fact, the number of inmates

usually varies even within a specific period of time due to the constant imprisonments and releases. Therefore, all the convicted male prisoners in the Welikada prison, at that time in which the research was carried out, were considered the total population for this study.

Further, 100 prisoners out of the total population were found to be registered members of the two libraries intended for the use of inmates at the Welikada Prison, hence, the said group was selected as the study population. The sample size was calculated at 95% confidence level and precision while Simple Random Sampling technique was adopted in the process. In order to collect data, a simple research questionnaire was administered among the subjects of the study, i.e. the selected 80 male prisoners, and the data thus collected were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed.

Results

The findings of the study indicate that the majority of the respondents were Sinhalese (80%), while Tamils, Muslims and Christians were 8.8%, 6.3% and 5% respectively. The age distribution of respondents revealed that the majority (41.3%) of convicted prisoners were aged between 40-50 years. It was also found out that the majority of educated prisoners were between the ages of 40-50, including 2 graduates, 16 inmates with G.C.E. Advanced Level qualification and 12 with G.C.E. Ordinary Level qualification. In addition, most of the respondents, i.e. 66 male prisoners (82.5%), were married, while 14 (17.5%) were single at the time of conviction.

Results demonstrate that a majority of the respondents (40%) possessed G.C.E. Ordinary Level qualification. Further, 33.75% of the respondents were with Advanced Level qualification, 20% had studied up to grade ten, 5% with a university degree and 1.25% with a Master’s degree (Table 1).

The findings also indicate that a number of literacy training programmes for the inmates were conducted

by the rehabilitation section of the Welikada Prison. Dhamma School: “Sucharithodaya Daham Pasala,” was found to be the main literacy training school in the prison, in which, a 207 total number of prisoners were studying during the time of consideration. It was also noted that, among them, 16 prisoners were reading for the final examination of the Dhamma School, similarly, 20 were reading for the Dharmacharya Examination. The results of the prisoners of the final examination - Dhamma School are given in Table 2.

Another feature of the literacy training that was provided for the benefit of those who were unable to read and/ or write, in particular, found to be the English and Tamil classes conducted in the Welikada Prison. The sole purpose of such language classes had been to develop the reading and writing skills of the prisoners. However, it was noted that, 32.5% of the sample did not take any interest in those training programmes. On the contrary, some prisoners were enjoying the benefit and getting the maximum advantage from the said programmes, during their imprisonment.

Out of the study sample of 80 prisoners, 28.7% were attending only secondary literacy training programmes, 17.5% were attending only primary literacy training programmes, whereas 15% were taking part in both primary and secondary literacy training programmes (Table 3).

Regular monthly magazines within the prison walls is another significant aspect that was revealed through

Table 1 — Educational level of the selected sample

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid G10 or below	16	20.0	20.0	20.0
O/L	32	40.0	40.0	60.0
A/L	27	33.8	33.8	93.8
Graduates	4	5.0	5.0	98.8
Master’s	1	1.3	1.2	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 — Examination results of Dhamma School

Prison Number	Index Number	Subjects			
		Buddhas’ Character	Sasana History	Buddhism & Pali Language	Buddhist Culture
K7681	9004181	C	C	S	F
N718	9004190	F	F	S	F
L2328	9004203	F	S	S	F
R8660	9004211	S	C	C	S
-	9004220	F	C	S	F
R36447	1016326	S	S	D	S
S11792	1016334	S	S	C	S
F11458	1016342	S	C	C	S

Table 3 — Educational level of the selected sample

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Valid Primary	14	17.5	17.5	17.5
Secondary	23	28.7	28.7	46.3
Tertiary	5	6.3	6.3	52.5
Nothing	26	32.5	32.5	85.0
Other	12	15.0	15.0	100.0
Total	80	100.0	100.0	

the study, namely; "Sucharitha Prathibha", "Katuithimatha Supipi Kusum" and "Madissale", in which poetry, short stories, articles, puzzles, and reviews were the major contents. Few selected extracts from the published writings of inmates are stated below.

Quick Decisions:

If the result is positive, there is nothing wrong with making a hasty decision. But if your immediate decision is negative, you should think twice about it. This includes all the losers who say I was too brusque (*Rathnayaka, Nimal, "KatuithimathaSupipi Kusum"*)

The Mirror:

Though I could see a thousand eyes
 In my own eyes
 The two amazing pearls I see
 The Mirror (*Chaminda, U.D., "Madissale" Volume 3*)

An advice:

Dear Friends, Prison is a university for an intellectual and a doss house to an idiot. But if you violate the law of the country, you will definitely be imprisoned. Therefore, live a life of righteousness and upbringing (*Ananda, S.D., "Madissale" Volume 3*)

In addition, it was remarkable that some prisoners deemed to possess a significant level of skill in writing fictions and books of other genres. "Poppy"(2014):a novel about war, "Kucha": a book which discusses how the world is changing and how to stand up for equality when it fails, "Vijanathi Pajanathi" (2016): a story woven around the degenerative goodness of the slum life,"Asiyanusaye": a book on crime control, set an excellent example for the fact, all of which were written by a prison inmate: Kiribathgoda Vajira.

Moreover, it was found that Welikada Prison Library had a reader society of 100 registered prisoners. As the results indicate, the usage of information resources was as follows; religious materials (63.8%), health (62.5%), financial (62.5%), legal (61.2%), news (52.5%), stories (40%) and general knowledge (37.5%). The findings suggest that the prisoners exhibited some significant need of information resources under the seven categories mentioned. The results are given in Fig. 1.

Another finding of the study is that most of the prisoners are in a dire need of the resources in relation to vocational information, which in turn can help

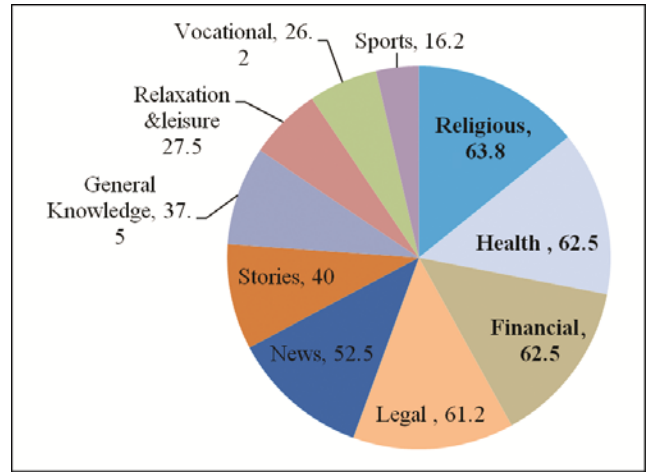


Fig. 1 — Information resources used by prisoners

them find a career after the period of imprisonment ceases. On the one hand, this specific requirement of information could be easily facilitated through providing inmates with appropriate resources such as reading materials, for example, printed materials on handcraft and art, on the other hand, by facilitating the prisoners with practical learning opportunities. Such information will certainly prepare them for the 'life after prison'.

It was further revealed that most of the prisoners were of the view that no knowledge in any of those areas is a waste, instead, an individual needs to be steadily informed for growth and progress in terms of mental and spiritual growth, progress in education and to cater the legal requirements of life. More importantly, most of the prisoners believed that they found themselves in a prison as a result of lack of education.

Nevertheless, it was obvious that the Welikada Prison service has not been able to facilitate the inmates with library and information resources adequate enough to cater the information needs of the prisoners. As it was discovered in the study, many of the materials were screened out and restricted from the prison library, which in turn massively limits the access of information availability for the prisoners. On the other hand, the tight schedule of the inmates seem to restrict the access of the limited available information resources that prevail within the prison walls.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveals that the prison libraries are a significant means with much potential

for information literacy development of offenders. Due to the restricted circumstances of prisoners, prison libraries hold utmost importance as a source of accessing information and could be considered as a great means of influence to the prisoners during the imprisonment. It is obvious that prisoners should be provided with the necessary freedom and the related opportunities to exercise their fundamental right of reading and accessing information. In order to serve this purpose, the prison library can play a substantial role in the Sri Lankan Prison system.

In fact, Sri Lanka being a developing country, the Sri Lankan prison library system still exists in a backward position. Although many prisons in the country have in built small libraries, they still exercise a certain informal and elementary level. In fact, there are two libraries in the Welikada Prison itself. It was witnessed during the study that, worn with the use, a book in a prisoner's hands was being read for the eighth time. Once a shabby corner with few books on a small shelf, the Welikada Prison Library, being renovated in July 2017, now occupies cupboards, tables and chairs with more than 5,000 books of different genres. However, it seems that there is a long way to go to create the Model Library which has been planned by the Special Committee of Prison Library Services.

Many prisoners proved to have literacy skills in writing, poetry, fictions and general books based on their thinking and common social experience. One prisoner named Kiribathgoda Vajira, who has already published five of his books sets the best example for the context. The gravity of the themes of his work and the content that seemed to be rich with much depth is commendable.

The study has also revealed that a significant number of prisoners are general readers. Even though many of the prisoners are not highly educated, most of them have had the basic and secondary education. The fact that the majority of the inmates had possess a certain level of education prior to the imprisonment also hints at the information needs of the literate prisoners.

As the study reveals, a few others those who do not fall under the category of literate prisoners, seem to use the library at times, while very few of the rest use it rarely or do not access it at all. It is that crowd who does not portray any interest in reading. Possibly, all what they are after is regaining the freedom that has been restricted, in one hand, prison is not a place to

relax, in a very common lens. Nevertheless, most of the prisoners; both convicted and awaiting trials, belonged to different groups, took delight in reading. However, their tight schedule seemed to hinder their access of information and engagement in reading.

Mr. Ratnayake; The Incharge of the Prison Library, explains, "We have improved the facilities for death row inmates. Every day they are taken outside for 30 minutes of exercise. They have access to the library, and can also go to the gym. It is mandatory that they attend Sunday Dhamma School and engage in meditation on Poya days. We have an inmate here who studied and obtained his degree, and is now reading for his Master's. The university kindly sends his text books and recorded lectures. We also have adult inmates who sit for the O/L and A/L exams. Therefore, prison authorities should help prisoners to develop their literacy skills."

Prisoners, just like any other individuals in society, have been observed to have various information needs that can be catered through library and information services. Providing for the needs of such prisoners will help in achieving the objectives such as improving the literacy of prisoners, rehabilitating, re-socializing, and re-integrating and preparing them into becoming better citizens who can get well readapted into the society after their life in the prison.

Recommendations

First, Prison library service - a neglected area in Sri Lankan prisons - requires and deserves adequate attention, along with a proper plan for development, along with more resources to be equipped with. Even though, thousands of inmates from all strata of society are found in the Sri Lankan prisons, facilitating them with quality library and information services still seems to be a distant dream.

These circumstances demand a proper mechanism to be implemented to provide the Sri Lankan prisoners with effective library information services, which should be based on an extensive and comprehensive information analysis of the information needs of prisoners in the particular environment. In addition, hindrances in relation to the infrastructure facilities, such as location, space, lighting, etc are some of the main attributes that might directly affect the accessibility of library resources by the prisoners, consequently, needs to be carefully looked at and addressed in order to make effective utilization of the resources.

Further, additional prison libraries to boost information services for prisoners need to be established in other prison locations across the country, which in turn, would facilitate the prisoners with their quick reference information, help recreation, and provide legal aid information while enhancing the quality of rehabilitation. Consequently, this will transform the inmates to well-informed and updated citizens.

Additionally, the extended services of the national, state and public libraries should be merged with the prison library system through periodic lending services. This consolidation of the library services would be a definite solution in bridging the gap between the necessity and the availability of the library resources, a concern related to most prison libraries in Sri Lanka. Moreover, it naturally would be a positive turn at the inability of prison authorities in providing the specific materials to the prisoners.

Similarly, it is compulsory that the necessary steps are taken by the prison authorities to allocate some reasonable duration for the prisoners to access library and information resources available there in. This would best serve the purpose, provided library hours become a part of the daily routines scheduled for the inmates. Furthermore, the Guidelines to prison library services in Sri Lanka should be developed by the Prison Service in collaboration with the Library Association and stakeholders.

The study also revealed that the prison libraries are not usually managed by a professional librarian, but by some prisoners and untrained rehabilitation officers those who lack necessary qualifications to meet the requirements of the particular role. In fact, a Diploma in Library Studies is usually considered the minimum qualification required by a library officer. At the same time, another aspect that matters is the personality of the person who functions as the librarian in a prison library. In precise, the character of the librarian must possess the necessary attribute of the interest in working with prisoners and should be an individual with a strong character with passion and capability to provide prisoners with suitable and necessary information for a positive transformation of their lives.

Moreover, a readership promotion programme could be embarked upon the inmates to heighten their interest in reading, and as a means of cultivation reading habits. Equally important is the fact that the prisoners should be made aware of the advantages of

reading in the rehabilitation process, which could easily be accomplished through an awareness programme, within the prison walls.

Another important aspect for consideration is that the Prison library infrastructure and equipment do not seem to keep pace with the development in Sri Lanka. Lack of accommodation including buildings and space are some of the major issues that exist. Thus, it urges the need for urgent policy measure to address the perennial problems in Sri Lankan prisons in relation to the effective provisions of information services.

However, based on a proper evaluation of the views held by the prisoners; expansion of the reader society, requirement of the books on technical skills and astrology, necessary awareness of short-term prisoners regarding the available library facilities, the need of a proper system, rules and regulations for the prison library system, the need of a reference section, the requirement of accessing magazines such as 'Manahara', 'Muthuhara' and books of academic value, Literature and translations of the Universal Literature, the need of accessing information related to all categories of state awards, held a great significance. Subsequently, those suggestions could be safely treated as other recommendations derived from this study.

The fact that many prisoners portrayed adequate literacy skills and interest in writing novels and general books on their common social experiences is noteworthy. Mr. Ratnayake ; an inmate who has published five books and who functions as the in charge of the Welikada Prison Library, explains, "We have improved the facilities for death row inmates. Every day they are taken outside for 30 minutes of exercise. They have access to the library, and can also go to the gym. It is mandatory that they attend Sunday Dhamma School and engage in meditation on Poya days. We have an inmate here who studied and obtained his degree, and is now reading for his Masters. The university kindly sends his text books and recorded lectures. We also have adult inmates who sit the O/L and A/L exams. Therefore, prison authority should help prisoner to develop their literacy skills. This may be a great opportunity for the success of prisoners' rehabilitation process."

In addition, in order to make these literacy education programmes successful, there are few factors that need to be taken into serious consideration. Such factors include; positive

relationships between teachers and students, i.e. prisoners, motivation in the form of various incentives to encourage enrollment and completion of the programmes, concerns on important two factors; age and race of the inmates who get enrolled in the programmes etc.

At one level, the knowledge gained through this study can positively influence the field of education, the prison system and society as a whole, and at another level, it could help the prison inmates to become lifelong learners by way of cultivating necessary practices in them, during their imprisonment.

Suggested strategies in order to enhance the provision of library and information resources include; connecting with public libraries, religious bodies, legal practitioners, professional bodies, such as library association and stakeholders, allowing additional information flows from other sources such as religious groups, purchasing of reading materials by the prison authorities, allocating time for the prisoners to make use of the library and information resources and services, allowing more access to library and information materials including the use of the internet, adhering to the existing guidelines and developing new guidelines in relation to the prison library services.

To sum up, Literacy is indispensable and central to efficient functioning of every individual including prisoners. It requires ample reading skills to cope up with the demands of everyday life. Functional literacy is significantly important and highly needed as far as the inmates are concerned, in order to be empowered and to be successful in life after being released from prisons (Post-imprisonment). The findings revealed that there was a high percentage of illiterates in Sri Lankan prisons. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the inmates were interested to be literate during their imprisonment. The findings of this study, therefore, compel the Non-Governmental Organizations

(N.G.O.) to assist the Sri Lankan prisons, in this regard.

References

- 1 Mokhtar IA and Majid S, Information Literacy Standards, Guidelines and their Implementation: An Analysis, *DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology*, 28 (2) (2008) 5-12.
- 2 Ladbrook J and Probert E, Information skills and critical literacy: Where are our digikids at with online searching and are their teachers helping? *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 27(1)(2011) 105-121.
- 3 Juliana M M, Juliana M T and Mary A C, Literacy Programs in Prison: Ideas about Purpose, Culture, and Content, *Journal of Correctional Education*, 52(2)(2011) 74-78.
- 4 Jarson J, Information literacy and higher education: a toolkit for curricular integration, *College & Research Libraries News*, 71(10) (2010) 534-528.
- 5 CILIP Definition of Information Literacy, 2018 available at <https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf>
- 6 Behrens S J, A Conceptual Analysis and Historical Overview of Information Literacy, *College & Research Libraries*, (1994) 309-22.
- 7 American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy Report 1989, Available at <http://www.infolit.org/documents/89Report.html>
- 8 "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education".ala.org/acrl. Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)
- 9 Grassian ES and Kaplowitz JR, Information literacy instruction: theory and practice, *The Australian Library Journal*, 60(2)(2011) 177-178.
- 10 Rockman IF, Integrating information literacy into the higher education curriculum: Practical models for transformation, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- 11 Dike VW, Prison library services in Nigeria, *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 2 (1) (2002) 26-37.
- 12 International Federation of Library Association and Institutions (IFLA), Guidelines for library services to prisoners (3rd Ed.), 2005.
- 13 Sullivan L E, Reading in American Prisons: Structures and Structures, *Libraries and Culture*, 33 (1) (1998) 113-19.
- 14 Lehmann Vand Locke J, Guidelines for library services to prisoners. IFLA Professional Reports, 2005, p. 92.
- 15 Iloeje MU, Libraries and Librarians: making a difference in the knowledge Age in a compendium of papers presented at the 39th National Conference and AGM of the NLA: Owerri; 2001, p.22-26.