

Reading Habits of Children Using Public Libraries in Jaffna District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Reading habit is one of the most essential elements of an individual's personal and intellectual development. If the habit of reading is inculcated in the childhood, it would help in enhancing knowledge, skills, imagination and creativity among children. The aim of the present study is to evaluate the reading habit of children utilizing public libraries in the Jaffna District, with the intension of enhancing the quality of services provided by the public libraries for children within the district. The descriptive survey research method was adopted. The participants were randomly selected from the list of active members (between the age group 3-14) of the public libraries (n=60) in the Jaffna District. At few instances, purposive sampling technique also employed. A self-administered structured questionnaire was distributed to the selected participants (n=458) ensuring the diversity in the participants pool, in relation to sex, age and locality. The Jaffna, Valikamam, Thenmaradchchi, Vadamaradchchi, and Islands area served as the study's base. The duly completed questionnaires received were analyzed quantitatively (using SPSS version 21) and qualitatively (using NVivo version 12). Out of 458 questionnaires distributed, 370 were returned, with the response rate of 80.78%. The study sample comprised 183 (49.5%) females and 187 (50.5%) males, within the age range of 3-14 years and covering entire geographical area of the Jaffna District. The findings revealed that 87.8% of the respondents prioritized reading as their leisure activity. Among the respondents, 94.6% expressed their interest in reading books, 54.3% preferred to spend 1-2 hours per day for reading. Further, the majority of the respondents expressed a preference for reading story books, in addition, showed interest in children's magazines and newspapers. Moreover, 59.5% of the respondents preferred reading materials in multiple formats. For the majority of respondents' favorite place for reading is home, followed by public libraries. The primary purpose for visiting the public libraries is borrowing library materials (66.8%), and searching

for required reading material carried out with the support of library catalogues, assistance from library staff, browsing through bookshelves, etc. Considering the accessibility, 93.8% of respondents live within 10 Km radius from a public library. With regard to library facilities for children in the public libraries of Jaffna, collection, shelf arrangement, lending and reference services, opening hours, library environment, and the staff assistance are not up to the level of users' expectation, which was measured by using 4-point Likert scale. Besides, more than 50% of the survey participants expressed satisfaction with the library programs. However, library programs such as storytelling, reading promotion and reader development, reading clubs, and language classes were rated poor. The study identified insufficient reading materials, language issues (e.g., lack of books in Tamil, level of English language proficiency), lack of time, overloaded with schoolwork, absence of a conducive reading environment, and lack of diversity in children's literature as major obstacles related to reading habits of children. The study suggests adopting a comprehensive approach to foster reading habits and literacy in children. This approach would include parental involvement, the establishment of libraries in rural regions, enhancing children's library resources and facilities, promoting reading through competitions, raising awareness about the importance of reading, reducing academic pressures such as tutoring, and allocating more time for leisurely and enjoyable reading. Implementing these measures could be instrumental in achieving the goal of this study.

Keywords: Children, Reading habits, Public libraries, Jaffna, Sri Lanka.