

Status of Literacy in Sri Lanka: Gaps, Challenges and Possibilities

Chandra Gunawardena

Former Dean & Senior Professor of Education

Open University of Sri Lanka

Why Literacy?

Literacy –

- An educational tool of crucial importance to life in a literate society
- An indispensable instrument for access to further learning & training opportunities, to realize human potential
- Contributes to economic prosperity, good health, to cultural identity, civic participation & tolerance
- New Millennium - an age of knowledge, in which the key resource for prosperity has become knowledge itself; the emphasis is shifting from creating & transporting physical objects to knowledge itself
- At the heart of the social, cultural, economic & political well-being of individuals, communities, societies & nations & indeed of the world

Illiteracy

- Leads to poverty, disadvantage & social exclusion
- Not merely an inability to read and write but a complete socio-economic phenomenon, rooted in poverty and deprivation
- Limits the potential for societies to deal with issues such as discrimination, poor health, social exclusion & powerlessness

Delivery Model of Literacy – Sri Lanka

- A very successful model of literacy delivery,
- supported by free education,
 - a good network of schools,
 - provision of ancillary facilities such as school meals, books, school uniforms and subsidized transport &
 - enactment of compulsory education legislation.

Literacy in Sri Lanka

- Compulsory Education Regulations enforced from January 1998
- Parents to enroll children from 5 to 14 years in educational institutions or make adequate & suitable provision for the education of their children.
- **But around 8% of the 5-14 aged children estimated to be out of school**
- Mostly concentrated in low-income urban neighbourhoods, remote or disadvantaged rural communities, plantations & in conflict affected areas.

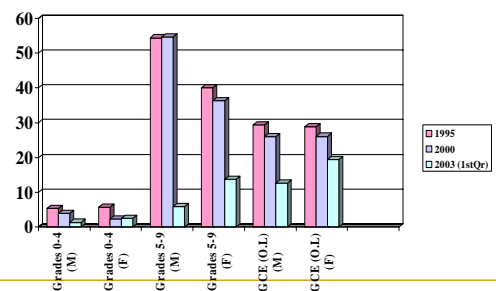
Literacy in Sri Lanka

- The Constitution of Sri Lanka - the goal "the complete eradication of illiteracy and assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels" (Article 27 (2) h)
- A rise in the level of literacy
 - **1946** - 62.8 %
 - **1981** - 83.2%
 - **2001** - 90.7 % ,
92.3% - males, 89.2 % -females

Role of the State

- The Ministry of Education - Division on Non-formal, Continuing and Special Education
- Non-formal education programmes include
- Literacy classes for school drop-outs and illiterate adults
 - Programmes in Activity Learning Centres for school drop-outs of age range 10-16 years and no-school-going children - Combine literacy with courses on developing income-generating skills of school-leavers.

Unemployed Persons by Level of Ed. and Sex



Unemployed Persons by Level of Education

- % unemployed for those with 'No Schooling' as 2 and 1 for males & females (World Bank, 2005)
- Should not construe that illiteracy facilitates employment but understand that illiteracy compels individuals to accept jobs with lower conditions of service & that they are less selective about the nature of jobs

Why Literacy Assessment?

- Most literacy data rely either on individuals' self-declaration of their own literacy or on 'proxy' indicators such as educational levels
- Official statistics regarding literacy rosier than warranted
- Claimed literacy would differ from actual literacy
- Equating enrolment of children in school to acquisition of literacy unsatisfactory
- Children leaving school without gaining literacy or the early drop-outs become functionally illiterate after some years

Incidence of Literacy in Disadvantaged Communities in Sri Lanka (1995)

Methodology

- Sample from 12 deprived communities – (rural peasant, rural working class, urban slum, urban working class, fishing, plantation)
- 50 households from each
- All persons 10 & above in age (2133)
- 54.7% claimed to have completed primary education, 11% - never attended school, 34.4% - early dropouts

Incidence of Literacy in Disadvantaged Communities in Sri Lanka (1995)

Methodology (Contd.)

- Literacy – reading & writing ability
- Claimed literacy rates – people's own subjective judgment about ability to read & write,
- Actual literacy rate – Ability to read & write - a score of 100 considered as literate
 - **Ability to read**
 - (i) Associate printed words with pictorial symbols
 - (ii) Read words without the aid of pictorial symbols
 - (iii) Read with understanding giving oral answers to oral questions on the passage read
 - (iv) Read silently & demonstrate comprehension
 - **Ability to write**
 - (i) Listen & write sentences
 - (ii) Form & write words in context
 - (iii) Complete/fill forms in words & short sentences

Incidence of Literacy in Disadvantaged Communities in Sri Lanka (1995)

Findings – Literacy (%)

Characteristics	Claimed	Actual
Rural Peasant	92.5	60.0
Urban Slum	67.6	31.1
Male	86.3	69.0
Female	79.7	51.3
Sinhala Medium	85.6	64.4
Tamil Medium	74.9	46.1

Incidence of Literacy in Disadvantaged Communities in Sri Lanka (1995)

Literacy as related to socio-economic conditions

% of literates in each type of community and % of those	Spearman Correlation Coefficient
Who have been to school	0.60
Who are employed	0.71
Who completed the primary cycle	0.20
Those with a monthly income over Rs.1000	0.26
Who read books other than texts	0.37
Who read newspapers daily	0.77

Incidence of Literacy in Disadvantaged Communities in Sri Lanka Study (1995)

Limitations

- Not a national sample – only disadvantaged communities
- One identified community dropped out
- Not a baseline study – selected households
- Did not distinguish among the levels of literacy
- The score of 100 to be considered literate may have been too high

Learning Achievement and Development of Core Competencies (Grade 4)

Learning Achievement (NEREC,2004)

- In all three areas of literacy, numeracy & life skills below the desired mastery level.
- Disturbingly low levels of achievement in both Mother Tongue & Mathematics
- Gross disparities in achievement levels especially very low achievement in plantation schools

Issues Facing Literacy Development Initiatives in Sri Lanka

- Limited incidence of illiteracy does not warrant it to be pushed aside as a non-important issue, especially as illiteracy is more likely to affect
- *The underprivileged than the privileged;*
- *The poor than the rich*
- *The females than the males,*
- *The minorities - ethnic, cultural or linguistic and*
- *The handicapped/disabled.*

EFA Goals 4: Improving Adult Literacy

Indicators	Disaggregation	Data Source
Ratio of literate females (15-24)	Sex, Region, urban/rural, Social class, ethnicity, language, disabilities	Population censuses, household surveys, literacy surveys (LAMP)
Youth literacy rate (15-24 year olds)		
Adult literacy rate (age 15 and above.)		

Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP)

- International Survey developed by UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
- Designed to provide valid, reliable and comparable measures of proficiency in literacy & numeracy of adults.
- Collects some background information from the adult population.

Levels of Literacy

- Level 1 :- Persons with very poor skills.
- Level 2 :- Persons who can deal with simple type materials
- Level 3 :- Persons who can cope with the demands of every day life and work in a complex advanced society
- Level 4 & 5 :- Persons who demonstrate of higher-order information processing skills.

Conducting Survey

Key functions

- Overall Project Management.
- Survey design & implementation.
- Hiring, training & monitoring data collection staff & data collection procedures.
- Processing procedures for data capture, coding, editing & data file creation.

Country Requirement

- National pilot planning report (3 months prior to the data collection / field work).
- National Main Planning Report (3 months prior to the main survey).

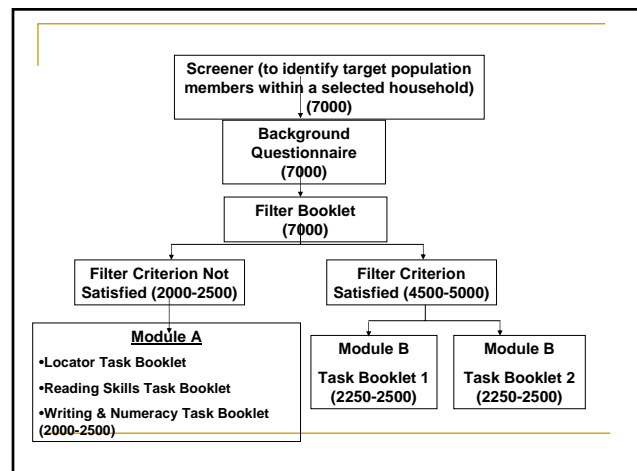
Methodology

Sample

- Pilot survey (500 cases) (each language)
- Final survey (7000 cases) (both languages)

Instruments (provided by the UNESCO to be translated & culturally adapted)

1. In-person interviews – background questionnaire
2. Assessment task booklets (literacy (prose & document) , numeracy & component skill task (reading, writing & numeracy) booklets)



Why LAMP?

- Focuses on Five Levels of Literacy – from very basic reading & writing to the higher level skills needed to participate fully in a learning society
- Can distinguish between low-literacy adults who can perform only basic tasks & those unable to read or write at all
- Can assess the literacy level of the adult population, identify which groups have low-literacy skills
- Use research findings to design & develop curricula & instruction
- Use in decision-making regarding resource allocation