Fostering Lifelong Learning: Strategies for Cultivating a Reading Culture Among Key Stage 3 Students in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Education stands as a cornerstone for personal and societal advancement, with reading revered as an art capable of profound transformation. This study delves into the effectiveness of strategies aimed at nurturing a thriving reading culture among Key Stage 3 students. Guided by four primary objectives, it seeks to illuminate the strategies employed by school librarians and teachers, assess challenges encountered in their implementation, gauge educators' attitudes toward these strategies, and explore the school environment's role in promoting reading culture.

Employing a case study research design, this study investigates the efficacy of library strategies in cultivating a reading culture among Key Stage 3 students. The findings reveal the effectiveness of implemented strategies despite challenges posed by human and physical resources for educators. Overall, the study underscores the pivotal role of strategic interventions in fostering a successful reading culture among Key Stage 3 students, providing valuable insights for educational practitioners and policymakers alike.

Keywords: Primary Education, Culture, Academic success, Lifelong learning

BACKGROUND

Education seeks to produce well-rounded individuals equipped with knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes, thereby playing a crucial role in determining success for both individuals and communities. Moreover, education is fundamental to the development of a strong and prosperous nation. Recognizing the pivotal role of education, we cannot overlook the profound connection between reading and learning. Education is widely acknowledged as the primary catalyst for personal and societal success, while reading is esteemed as an art capable of profoundly transforming both individual lives and entire societies (Makotsi, 2005, as cited by Busayo, 2011).

Reading serves as the gateway to a vast treasury of knowledge and has become paramount in the realm of education. Defined by the World Book Encyclopedia (1994) as the process of deriving meaning from printed or written words (as quoted by Nalusiba, 2010), reading is viewed as a creative endeavor where the reader actively engages with the text to construct meaning. Reading forms the foundational pillar for acquiring knowledge and enriching one's academic pursuits. Furthermore, Sentuwa (2004) regards reading as a fundamental learning skill that complements all other educational endeavors, highlighting the profound relationship between reading and learning.

Beyond the confines of academic institutions, reading transcends into a lifelong pursuit. Okusaga (2008) asserts that reading stands uniquely as both a form of entertainment and an essential life skill. Similarly,

Douglas (2000), as cited by Aina et al. (2011), emphasizes the critical role of proficient reading in a child's academic success and civic engagement within a democratic society. Fosudo (2010) underscores the detrimental effects of poor reading skills on a student's attitude towards learning, potentially leading to self-esteem issues later in life. It is evident that reading is not merely a tool for achieving educational milestones but an indispensable life skill with far-reaching impacts on personal and pedagogical aspects.

Reading serves as the cornerstone of learning, while cultivating a culture of reading embodies the philosophy of fostering a positive attitude towards reading. Nyam (2015) defines reading culture as "the habitual engagement with reading, characterized by an attitude and skill set that transform reading into a pleasurable, regular, and consistent activity" (as cited by Alex-Nmecha & Horsfall, 2019, p.4). Similarly, Ruterna (2012) elucidates reading culture as a composite framework encompassing various reading behaviors, practices, beliefs, perceptions, and knowledge, emphasizing both the frequency and duration of engagement with reading materials. This cultural inclination or habit facilitates the absorption of reading and study as foundational elements of personal growth and development.

Moreover, within formal educational settings, reading occupies a central position. The concerning decline in reading culture among learners poses a significant challenge to educational achievement. Numerous researchers, including Cunningham & Stanovich (1998), Ogbodo (2002), Bhan & Gupta (2010), and Singh (2011), have documented the pervasive erosion of reading culture globally (as cited by Chettri & Rout, 2013; Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2014). Vitdanapathirana (1996) and Wickramanayake (2016) corroborate this trend in Sri Lanka, underscoring the imperative of school libraries in nurturing reading culture among primary students. School libraries play a pivotal role in promoting reading culture among children, particularly considering the shift towards resource-based education in contemporary educational systems. Consequently, fostering a reading culture is essential not only for cultivating reading habits but also for realizing holistic education objectives. Thus, educational systems must take proactive measures to integrate reading into students' lifestyles, with school libraries and administrators employing various strategies to instill and sustain a vibrant reading culture. Cultivating the habit of reading at an early stage will therefore be beneficial to a person. In this light, the reading habits of primary students in Sri Lanka is sought by this study.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

In Sri Lanka, primary education comprises three distinct stages: Key Stage 1 – Grades 1 & 2, Key Stage 2 – Grades 3 & 4 and Key Stage 3 – Grade 5. These stages are delineated according to the competency level appropriate for each age group. Key Stage 3 represents the final phase of primary education, emphasizing literacy skills and formal academic pursuits. It is during this stage that students encounter the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination, a highly competitive assessment used to determine admission to National Schools and award bursaries. Studies show wide discrepancies in academic achievements of primary level students in Sri Lanka due to disparities in financial, human and social resources at home and at school (Herath, 2008).

This study sought to investigate the effectiveness of strategies aimed at fostering a successful reading culture among Key Stage 3 students. It was guided by four main objectives: firstly, to identify the strategies utilized by school librarians and teachers to promote a thriving reading culture within this demographic; secondly, to assess the challenges encountered by these educators in implementing such strategies effectively; thirdly, to gauge the attitudes of school librarians and teachers towards the various strategies employed in cultivating a successful reading culture among Key Stage 3 students; and finally, to explore the role of the school environment in contributing to the promotion of reading culture among students in this age group. The study employed a case study research design to examine the efficacy of library strategies in fostering a culture of reading among Key Stage 3 students.A single class from a school was chosen, and data collection from the selected sample involved conducting interviews, observations, and document analysis.

DISCUSSION

Promote reading: Access to books and choice.

When analyzing the strategies implemented by the library to develop a successful reading culture, significant trends emerged. At first, it could not be denied the fact of attending the library period. Generally, attendance of library period of Key Stage 3 students stood above 90%, and the attendance record of the particular classroom was at 97.8%, approximately considered as 98%. This study demonstrated the importance of allowing students to select their reading material.

Access to the library was a fundamental strategy in promoting a reading culture among students. The library investigated in this study enabled the students to have free access to the library and the freedom to choose when to visit the library apart from the defined time slot. The students' attendance records affirmed this fact clearly. The high results of accessibility levels could be attributed to the strategies used by the library such as allocating specific time slots, opening the library during and after school. Another key fact to remember when discussing accessibility to the library is the regular library visits of teaching staff and administrators. Thus, it is evident the strategies taken to improve access to the library were fully utilized. The availability of reading materials in the library was at a satisfactory level despite the lack of electronic materials and internet connection. The students were allowed to choose reading materials as their preference and the color code strategy was worth mentioning as it made easy access to reading materials and selecting them.

The researcher observed that students had total freedom to select the reading material according to their interests. The focus group interview data revealed that there was a positive relationship between having the opportunity to choose the reading material and the affective aspects of reading. These results were consistent with those of Clark & Rumbold's (2006) finding which showed that 80% of students enjoy the books they have selected rather than reading books selected by other parties.

The motivational programs had a great impact on developing a successful reading culture of Key Stage 3 students. They were especially stressed with the scholarship exam and that kind of programs helped in releasing their stress. There were several motivational programs recommended to develop the reading culture of students. On the other hand, students' willingness to participate in those strategies was at a higher level and they held a positive attitude toward engaging activities and reading various materials. Wedikandage and Herath (2020) points out that success of a programme can be predicted by the attitudinal changes of the school community. Thus, it can be concluded that those motivational programs functioned in an effective way and had a great impact on encouraging the student to practice reading as a regular activity.

Instructional strategies were effective to remain in the focus of reading and in return, it sharpened students' literacy skills in a systematic manner. Strategies related to environmental factors had a greater impact on developing a reading culture of students than the expected level. The strategies that were taken in association with changing the outer and inner look of the library contributed to increasing students' interest in visiting the library and spending more time in the library. The outer appearance and the inner environment of the library were at a satisfactory level. The library space was used at an optimum level. Thus, it is evident there were several strategies implemented by the library in order to develop a successful reading culture.

Challenges

Even though the library was situated in a separate building, there was not enough space in comparison to the total number of students who visited the library. These findings seemed to be consistent with other research which affirmed the negative impact of insufficient space in libraries for achieving the goal of developing a

successful reading culture. Wickramanayake (2016) stressed the inadequacy of library buildings as a common difficulty faced by librarians in developing the reading culture of students. He further stressed that this was not only confined to the Sri Lankan context but also for most South Asian developing countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal. Through interviews, the researcher revealed that insufficient space led to many difficulties in implementing a reading culture among students. Especially in the primary section, it was difficult to engage students in reading promotion activities or programs without adequate space for them to work. The library managed by a single person more often failed to cope with the pressure of varied duties required. It directly affected the successful implementation of strategies for developing the reading culture of students. These facts could be associated with the findings of US research studies which indicated "a positive relationship between full-time, qualified school librarians and scores on standards-based language arts, reading and writing tests, regardless of student demographics and school characteristics" (Lance & Kachel, 2018, p.16). The researcher further revealed that almost all the time when the librarian fulfilled her duties, the teaching staff or the non-academic staff were not very supportive. In accordance with the reflected findings, the difficulties faced by the librarian and the teacher in implementing strategies to develop a successful reading culture among primary students could be put into two folds; lack of physical and human resources and the low practicability of implementing several strategies in a situation of inadequate physical and human resources.

School culture

The school environment consisted of parents, organizations, educational institutions, and other relationships the school maintained with society. Sivananthan and Wedikandage (2023) state that there will be a positive impact on the academic achievement of students if the schools have an effective relationship with their community. Thus, the parents' contribution to the development of a successful reading culture of students through library strategies was appreciated. Most of the parents were aware of the strategies implemented by the library in order to stir students for reading, and most of them were actively supported by the librarian and teacher. Herath and Wedikandage (2021) stresses the importance of parental involvement to education. Thus, with the help of parents, the library book collection increased rapidly within three or four years. The relationship status of the library and administration and other organizations was examined, and it revealed that the librarian maintained a good relationship with the administration of the school, zonal and divisional administration, other schools, as well as community service organizations. With the help of the school community, the librarian was able to expand the reading materials of the library and enable students to choose books from a varied collection.

Reading and academic success

Out of 82% of parents who noted the development of their child with library activities, above 75% stated that the library helped in both the personal and academic development of the student. When analyzing secondary data of students' reading habits, the researcher found a positive relationship between students' library use and their academic achievements. Literature also confirmed that the library had a great impact on students' academic achievement. These results corroborated the findings of a great deal of the previous work on students' reading habits and educational achievement. Fosudo (2010) confirmed that the amount of reading that students did for pleasure and for academics was found to be a major contributor to their achievement. Herath (2022) states that there are wide disparities in achievement according to the type of school in Sri Lanka. Yet, if reading is encouraged, the achievement levels could be increased irrespective of the disparity.

In addition, the researcher analyzed the students' scholarship examination marks and their library visit records. To draw out a general result, the researcher focused on the average mark of 150-170. The researcher analyzed five years of library development and students' scholarship marks, and it revealed that there was a significant relationship between the library and students' academic achievement. In the year

2020, students were not able to engage in reading activities as other students in Key Stage 3 experienced new reading activities. Similarly, to other groups of students, in 2020, they were not able to visit the library. Therefore, in parallel to the previous group in 2019, the scholarship marks of average students in 2020 showed a little decrease (Fig:1).

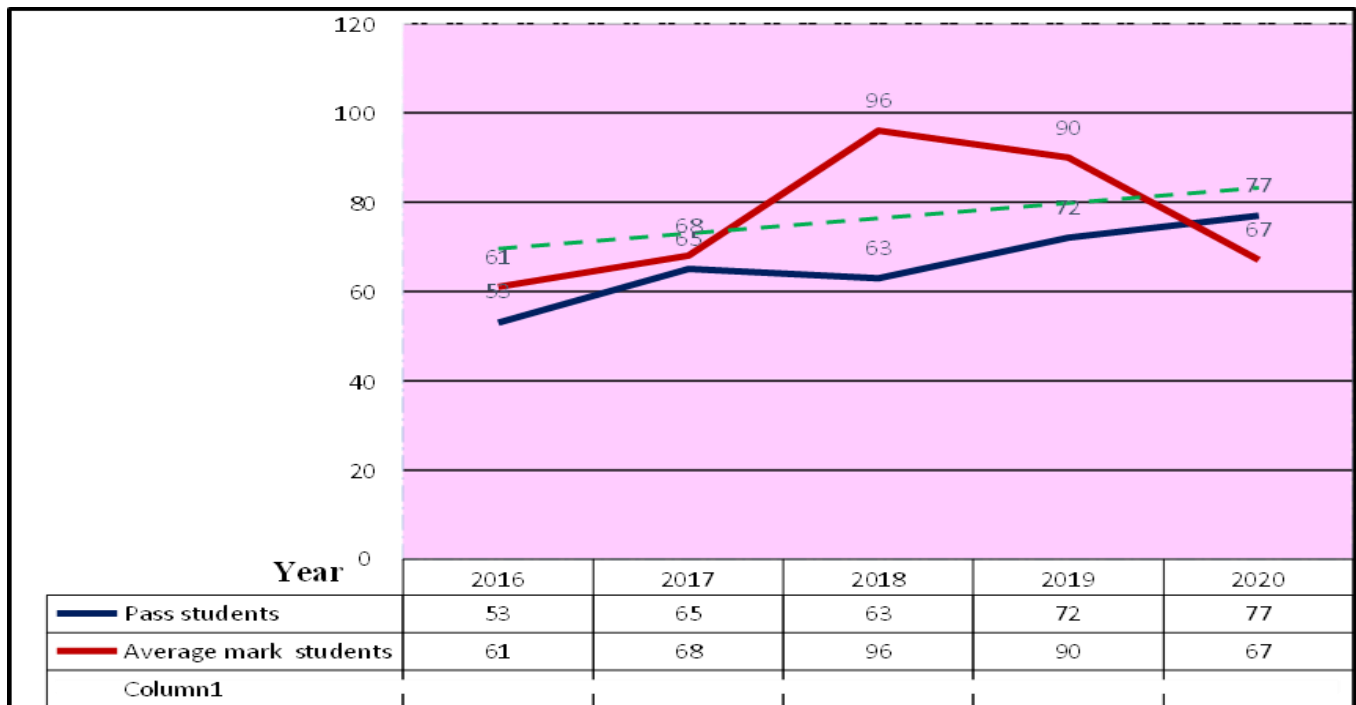| Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Pass students	53	65	63	72	77
Average mark students	61	68	96	90	67
Column1					

Figure 1: Marks gained at scholarship examination.

This could be since schools were closed for nearly half of the year, and they did not get the opportunity to engage with reading strategies, leading to a decrease in their interest in reading eventually. The school administration supported the library, as evidenced by the library committee report. The key implication drawn from this is that they have a plan for future work and they are well aware of their weaknesses and have planned to address those drawbacks. Furthermore, it helps to develop a successful reading culture of students through different strategies effectively.

CONCLUSION

The most evident conclusion drawn from this is that the strategies implemented to develop a successful reading culture among Key Stage 3 students are effective. Therefore, it can be concluded that most of the strategies implemented by the library function effectively in fostering a successful reading culture among Key Stage 3 students, despite the challenges posed by human and physical resources for teachers and librarians. The librarian holds strong attitudes toward developing a reading culture through optimal strategies. Additionally, the library maintains a good relationship with the school administration, as well as with other institutions, community services, and organizations.

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