

Factors Affecting Language Literacy Amongst Young Prisoners in the Welikada Prison, Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the multifaceted factors influencing language literacy levels among young inmates (aged 18–30) at Welikada Prison, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Utilizing a qualitative approach that involves semi-structured interviews (questionnaires) and thematic analysis, the research identifies systemic, socio-economic, and psychological barriers to literacy. Findings suggest that while the Department of Prisons provides basic educational frameworks, overcrowding, lack of specialized instructors, and the prisonization effect significantly hinder literacy development. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating digital literacy and peer-mentorship programs to enhance rehabilitative outcomes.

Keywords: Language, Education, Digital learning, Prison environment

INTRODUCTION

Language literacy (the ability to read, write, and comprehend information) is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of successful rehabilitation. In Sri Lanka, the prison population often reflects broader societal inequalities. Welikada Prison, the nation's largest maximum-security facility, houses a significant number of young offenders whose literacy levels often fall below the national average.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (2020), the prison system remains primarily punitive rather than rehabilitative, which creates a vacuum for educational advancement. This paper seeks to understand why young prisoners struggle with language literacy and what specific environmental and personal factors impede their progress within the Welikada complexes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between incarceration and language literacy is a critical area of study within correctional education, particularly in developing nations like Sri Lanka. This literature review synthesizes existing research on the socio-economic, institutional, and psychological factors that influence literacy development among young prisoners, with a specific focus on the Welikada Prison context.

A significant body of literature suggests that literacy challenges often preceded incarceration. Jayasundara Gamage (2020) argues that many inmates in Sri Lankan prisons enter the system from disadvantaged backgrounds where educational attainment was hampered by poverty. This is consistent with international findings; Literacy Mid-South (2025) notes that a “welded link” exists between reading failure in early childhood and subsequent delinquency. In the Sri Lankan context, Chandan and Weerasooriya (2020) observe that young offenders often belong to marginalized urban communities where high school dropout rates are prevalent, leaving them with functional illiteracy before they even enter the gates of Welikada.

The physical and administrative environment of the prison plays a decisive role in literacy outcomes. The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (2020) reported that Welikada Prison faces chronic overcrowding, which creates a “punitive” rather than “rehabilitative” atmosphere. This overcrowding results in a lack of quiet spaces for self-study and limited access to educational materials. Furthermore, Jayasundara Gamage (2020) identifies that while the “Daham Pasala” (Dhamma School) provides some literacy training, the overall

information literacy skills of prisoners are hindered by poor library infrastructure and restricted access to modern information sources. Kuruppu (2001) previously noted that while the Department of Prisons attempts to facilitate adult education, the focus remains heavily on vocational labor rather than cognitive-linguistic development.

Recent qualitative inquiries have begun to highlight the internal struggles of young offenders. Research by PubMed (2015/2025) indicates that young offenders often suffer from undiagnosed language and communication disorders, which leads to a “negative impact on self-esteem” and an inability to engage with traditional educational programs. Within the “prisonization” process—the adoption of the inmate subculture—literacy is often undervalued. Young inmates may perceive academic engagement as a sign of weakness or social non-conformity within the prison hierarchy. This is exacerbated by what Dike (2002) describes as “disadvantaged educational status,” which breeds a sense of academic hopelessness among the youth.

Literature on Sri Lankan prison reforms suggests that literacy is most effective when integrated with vocational training. Sachithra and Wijewardhana (2020) emphasize that for rehabilitation to be successful, educational programs must be transparent and fair. However, as noted by Yalini Saranya (2019) in her study of Welikada, much of the research and investment in rehabilitation has historically been gender-blind or focused on basic labor, often overlooking the specific linguistic and cognitive needs of the younger, emerging adult population.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design.

The sample consisted of 17 young male inmates (ages 18–30) who were selected using purposive sampling. Data collection was by one-on-one semi-structured interviews over a period of four weeks using the questionnaire prepared by the two researchers. The analysis was through thematic analysis, which was used to identify recurring patterns in the participants’ narratives regarding their educational history and current prison experiences.

Given the ethical grounds, permission to meet the above prisoners was not granted by the Welikada prison officials. The questionnaire was therefore handed to two prison officers, with permission obtained from the Welikada prison authorities one month before the study began. The two officers obtained inmates’ consent to interview them before administering the questionnaire. Confidentiality of the prisoners was respected, and the data collected was used only for the present study purpose.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of participants (n=12) reported a history of early school dropout. Many hailed from urban settlements in Colombo, where economic instability forced them into informal labor at a young age. Chandan and Weerasooriya (2020) note that poverty is a cross-cutting factor in criminal involvement; for these youth, literacy was never prioritized over immediate survival.

Welikada Prison is notoriously overcrowded, often operating at 200–300% capacity. In such environments, “survival” takes precedence over “study” (Weerasooriya, 2020). Participants noted that the wards are too noisy and poorly lit for reading. While the Prison library exists, access is often restricted by security protocols. Jayasundara Gamage (2020) highlights that prison libraries in Sri Lanka are often underfunded and lack modern, engaging material that would appeal to younger readers.

The “prisonization” effect—the process of accepting the culture and social habits of the prison—often leads to a devaluation of formal education. Young inmates reported a “fear of appearing weak” or “too academic” among peers. This social pressure creates a stigma around attending the prison’s *Daham Pasala* (Dhamma School) or literacy classes.

In Welikada, the linguistic diversity (Sinhala, Tamil, and English) presents both a challenge and an opportunity. However, the lack of bilingual instructors means that Tamil-speaking or Sinhala-speaking minorities within specific wards often face “literacy isolation,” unable to access the dominant language of instruction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The literacy crisis among young prisoners in Welikada is not merely a lack of books; it is a symptom of systemic neglect. To improve language literacy, the following steps are recommended:

1. Digital Integration: Introducing restricted E-readers to bypass the physical space constraints of the library.
2. Peer-Led Teaching: Training literate long-term inmates to act as mentors for younger offenders.
3. Vocational Literacy: Merging language lessons with vocational training (e.g., teaching technical vocabulary used in carpentry or tailoring) to increase perceived utility.

The study is a replicable and scalable model for prisons countrywide. The modular nature of its components—digital resource integration, peer-to-peer mentorship, and context-specific vocational training—allows for adaptation to varying security levels, inmate populations, and local economic demands. By establishing clear metrics for success, such as quantifiable improvements in literacy scores, vocational certification rates, and post-release employment, this initiative can serve as an evidence-based blueprint. Its successful implementation in Welikada could therefore provide a compelling case study, paving the way for systemic reform in offender education and rehabilitation on a much broader scale.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

Authors' Contributions

Author 1 designed the study, performed the analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author 2 managed the literature searches and completed the discussion. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Consent

Both authors declare that the written informed consent was obtained from the parties involved in the study.

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