

Literacy and numeracy

Sri Lankans take pride in their high literacy rate - 95.7% (male 96.9% and female 94.6%). It is no mean achievement for a developing country and this healthy situation is attributable mainly to free education in the post-Independence era and an education system which, coupled with a culture of learning and intertwined with religion, dates back to millennia ago.

President Maithripala Sirisena has recently said in Polonnaruwa that a plan is underway to ensure that the literacy rate reaches one hundred percent. A country should think big and it is hoped that the President will succeed in his endeavour.

Literacy has been defined as the acquisition of skills such as phonics, decoding, fluency, word stock, knowledge and comprehension and the use thereof to accomplish tasks as regards text. Whether these criteria are used in determining the literacy rate in any country is doubtful. Usually, what is taken into consideration is a person's ability to 'read and write with understanding a short, simple statement about his or her everyday life'.

Whatever the yardsticks used for that purpose may be there is room for the assessment of public literacy here to be called into question. A few years ago we pointed out, in these columns, the sorry state of affairs in our schools. Our comment was based on a survey conducted by the National Education Commission (NEC) with the participation of 4,054 students from 70 schools representing all provinces, except the North and the East. The NEC found that 18 per cent of the sixth graders could not write at all; 28 per cent of the tenth graders could not write legibly and only 35 cent of them could take down a passage dictated to them. Of the sixth graders concerned, only 41 per cent were at a satisfactory level of performance.

What a country should try to achieve is functional literacy which is traditionally defined as 'the level of skill in reading and writing that any individual needs in order to cope with adult life'. But, UN experts are of the view that functional literacy and numeracy go hand in hand to some extent and, therefore, it, in effect, means the 'level of reading, writing, and calculation skills sufficient to function in the particular community in which an individual lives'.

Computer literacy is also a prerequisite for a country's progress in the modern, knowledge-driven world. In Sri Lanka it is said to be at 25% (Department of Census & Statistics 'Computer Literacy Statistics - 2014'), but it will have to increase considerably within the next few years if we are to keep pace with the rest of the world. Besides, there are other handicaps the country is faced with. Most workers are monolingual and lack knowledge of English or any other international language and mathematical standards are woefully low.

A country should also strive for a high level of numeracy—ability to understand and work with numbers. It is believed that our numeracy is very low; no reliable statistics are, however, available to prove or disprove this claim. Most adults, especially traders, cannot do simple calculations without the aid of adding machines.

About 42 percent of students who sit the GCE O/L fail mathematics. We have argued in these columns previously, quoting S. Gudder *et al* that 'the essence of mathematics is not to make simple things complicated, but to make complicated things simple.' Instead of preparing children and thereby the nation to make complicated things in life simple with the wonderful tool called mathematics, teachers have turned it into a fearful monster of sorts, the mere mention of which is enough to make many a child shiver and hide under a desk.

Thus, it may be seen that increasing the literacy rate alone won't do if the country is to get a turbo boost to reach the next level of development, both human and physical. There are other educational goals to be achieved and governments must not lose sight of them.

