

Enhancing School Library Services in Sri Lanka: a Comparative Study of Western and North Central Provinces under IFLA/UNESCO Standards

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School libraries are pivotal in advancing information literacy and educational success, as outlined in the IFLA/UNESCO School Library Mission Statement, which emphasizes equitable access to quality library services. In Sri Lanka, despite educational advancements, school libraries face challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, staffing shortages, and significant urban-rural disparities. This study evaluates library services in the urban Western and rural North Central Provinces to assess alignment with IFLA/UNESCO standards. Research objectives were to examine the current state of library services, identify disparities in resources and professional support, and propose strategies for improvement. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research surveyed 50 schools (25 per province) under purposive sampling. Data were collected through observational studies, interviews, and questionnaires. Observations assessed infrastructure, interviews with librarians and educators explored operational challenges, and surveys captured student and teacher perspectives. Findings revealed that stark contrasts: 65% of Western Province libraries had dedicated spaces compared to only 15% in North Central Province, where just 10% offered digital tools and 5% employed trained librarians. Interviews identified chronic findings as shortages and inadequate training as key barriers, while surveys indicated 80% of students valued libraries but found resources insufficient. Urban libraries significantly outperformed rural ones, underscoring inequitable educational support. Both provincial libraries fell short of IFLA/UNESCO standards, particularly in rural areas, limiting learning outcomes. The study recommends, increasing government funding for rural library infrastructure, annual regional training workshops for librarians, and partnerships with local communities and stakeholders, to foster collaboration and resource sharing. These measures will support to bridge disparities, ensuring equitable and high-quality library services to enhance educational equity and information literacy across Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Educational equity; IFLA/UNESCO standards; Information literacy; School libraries; Urban-rural disparities*