

Information Literacy and Public Libraries in Peru: An Approach to Its Study

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Abstract. This paper explores the situation of information literacy activities in a sample formed by the public libraries of the five most populous districts of the province of Lima that serve more than three million inhabitants and represent approximately 37% of the population. For the data collection a documentary study was carried out; observations were applied and semi structured interviews were conducted. The results show that, in spite of national regulations and international recommendations, information literacy is still an unfamiliar concept in the public libraries of the sample, and IL activities are not carried out. District governments seem to ignore the potential and the social returns of libraries, particularly in areas where vast sectors of the population are socially excluded. As a consequence of the precarious situation in terms of personnel, collections, budget, and connectivity, public libraries are prevented from being a suitable space for IL activities.

Keywords: Information literacy, public libraries, social exclusion, social inclusion, Peru.

1 Introduction

Information literacy has become one of the essential concepts in the information society. Although the origin dates back to the 1970's it is in the last ten years that publications, academic encounters, online resources, etc. have appeared in large numbers. The Geneva Declaration of Principles states that "each person should have the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge in order to understand, participate actively in, and benefit fully from, the Information Society and the knowledge economy". This is a call for capacity building and for IL that challenges librarians and information professionals and demands a more active educational role. Together with lifelong education and social inclusion, IL becomes essential to help citizens connect with information, to bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor and to participate actively in the democratic life of society. For these purposes public libraries, by their very democratic nature, can play a very important role.

This study explores the situation of literacy activities in a sample of public libraries. Since it is known that most IL activities are carried out in university

libraries, we wanted to find out what was happening in the public libraries of five densely populated districts of Lima where the majority of the population live in difficult conditions. Interviews to personnel in charge of the libraries included: familiarity with the concept of IL, the type of activities, frequency, content, perceptions of user information skills, infrastructure and equipment facilities, problems, and coordination with the National Library of Peru.

The findings of this study will be of interest to information professionals, to municipalities and to the National Library, which is in charge of the National System of Libraries.

2 Literature Review

For many years poverty was considered only from the economic point of view. However, the term “*poverty*” has recently been replaced by “*social exclusion*,” a term that seems to explain more clearly a phenomenon that affects large sectors of the urban or rural population in key areas such as health, education, work, access to information, participation and access to justice. Social exclusion, of a multifactorial nature, places people in a disadvantaged situation which they cannot leave by their own means. Castells [1] defines exclusion as a process by which certain individuals and groups are prevented systematically from access to positions that would allow independent subsistence within social levels determined by institutions and values in a given context.

According to Muddiman [2], social exclusion relates not simply to a lack of material resources, but also to issues like inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power. Subirats et.al. [3] distinguish eight aspects of social exclusion: work, education, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, public health, space and housing, and justice. These are compounded by circumstances that intensify the exclusion (age, ethnic group or cultural origin) derived from structural elements as well. Jiménez [4] states that factors such as illiteracy, low education levels, dropping out of the school system without having obtained basic qualifications, academic failure, lack of command of foreign languages, among others, can lead to processes of social exclusion. Hernandez [5] also emphasizes the relevance of the educational dimension in poverty and the social exclusion. He indicates that education is one of the most influential factors in the construction of the life path of the individual. It determines, to a great extent, who is going to be in the position to reach the labor market and other spheres.

The sense of powerlessness of socially excluded people has been related to deprivation of capabilities. This new insight comes from the contribution of Amartya Sen [6] for whom poverty is not due strictly to economic factors but, rather, to the lack of capabilities which prevents people from making decisions and choosing freely. Capabilities are conditions and opportunities associated to basic needs, to economic needs and to political participation.

Governments, institutions of civil society and authorities play a fundamental role in achieving these conditions. Nussbaum [7], who also favors the capability approach, lists ten basic capacities that would have to be assured to each person by virtue of

their human dignity. The approach is related to human rights and the concept of human development. Nussbaum states that at the heart of the capabilities approach since its inception has been the importance of education. Education forms people's existing capacities into developed internal capabilities of many kinds. This formation is valuable in itself and a source of lifelong satisfaction. Britz et.al [8] have considered that the capability approach has important implications for the understanding of information-based rights and policy recommendations.

It is interesting to note that the capabilities approach can also be related to the concept of *information literacy*, because a capacity empowers the individual. Some definitions of information literacy highlight this aspect, as in the case of The Alexandria Proclamation [9] where it says, "IL lies at the core of lifelong learning. It empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals".

Stressing the educational dimension of information literacy, Campal [10] argues that public libraries and lifelong learning have an unavoidable relationship and these libraries are the learning resource centers for the community. In the same line, Lai [11] considers that the public library is a place which supports adult education and lifelong learning and has the capability of narrowing the digital divide by providing free computer and Internet access and offering training courses to improve people's IL skills. Sierra [12] notes that the concept of information literacy has become very important in the field of library science, particularly within the public library because it approaches the integral formation of the individual with respect to the use of information in different fields, including a strongly visible ethical and political dimension.

IL is also associated with the efforts to fight against social exclusion through the development of competencies that allow people to handle and evaluate information efficiently, ethically, in an increasingly complex information society. The Alexandria Proclamation [9] states that IL "is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion of all nations". Vincent [13], Dudziak [14], Gehner [15], Stilwell [16], Berrío [17], Oguz and Kurbanoglu [18] have approached the topic from different perspectives, but in association with libraries, particularly with public libraries, which have been identified as one of the most propitious spaces for IL activities in underprivileged sectors of society.

Gómez and Pasadas [19] consider that public libraries are an efficient instrument towards integration, learning and creation of social capital; as long as they can organize activities like training in information there will be an increase in citizen participation, community cohesion and personal and social development. However, Hall [20] warns that "the new literacy studies challenge the assumptions that public library users will become fully engaged and empowered members of a society, or that they will enjoy economic and social goods and privileges, just because they have been given access to the latest tools for storing, retrieving and producing information". She adds that libraries that simply offer classes on how to use new technologies are not doing enough. Hall concurs with Dudziak [14] when both, inspired by works of Paulo Freire, argue that information literacy is a liberating and emancipatory process. Regretting the lack or weaknesses of information literacy activities in European public libraries, Hernández y García [21] comment that with a shortage of economic resources and personnel and shortage of knowledge on methods of IL, public libraries

have been missing the opportunity to become trainers of a vast population of young people and non-university adults.

An interesting view that stresses how far or how close the citizens feel their public library is held by De Faveri [22] who believes that “for many working-class adults the library is as foreign an institution as a university or museum. Even relatively well-off working class people may not have a tradition of library use and so may feel that their lives, their values, and their concerns are not reflected in the culture of the library”. For that reason, she considers that breaking barriers to library use is about building relationships and it requires staff prepared to understand the community needs and the library’s role is meeting those needs. This is a challenge to librarians in search of a socially inclusive library.

3 The Peruvian Case

As in many parts of Latin America, in Peru *information literacy* is an unfamiliar concept for the general population and it is not a term much used by librarians. Lau [23] indicates that in the region some librarians still use *user education* or *user instruction*, instead of *information literacy*, because for most people illiteracy means the lack of reading and writing skills. He adds that graduates, professors and education administrators refuse to attend workshops where they will be “made literate”. Other concepts also used are: *information competencies* and *development of information abilities* or DHI, from its initials in Spanish. Further, the concepts are often used interchangeably; Rendón et.al. [24] admit the existence of many variants of the concept *formation of users* that tend to be confused, such as *user education*, *bibliographic instruction* and *library instruction*.

In search of testimonies of IL activities in Peru in the past, we found the book by Duarte [25] entitled *Introducción Bibliográfica para Estudiantes de Medicina*¹ published in 1958 by the National University of San Marcos. We also found the Proceedings of the Second National Congress of Librarianship and Information held in 1981 organized by the Peruvian Association of Librarians [26] where one of the working groups was dedicated to user training. As a result they prepared a training program for higher education users to train to solve problems related to study, education and research, and to familiarize them with the information sources in order to get access to subjects of their interest. The program mentioned various forms of instruction such as conferences, courses, preparation of handbooks and production of didactic materials.

In the last thirty years IL activities in Peru have been very limited in numbers and have been held mostly in university libraries, which seems to be common to Latin American countries, as the Declaration of Lima [27] recognizes. Lau [23] and Uribe [28] also confirm the situation; however, they observe a trend towards an increase in the number of publications, websites and events about information literacy. With

¹ Bibliographical Introduction for Medicine Students

regard to Peru, Uribe², who maintains an active and updated wiki about information literacy in Iberoamerica, finds four articles, thirteen papers offered in national events, one chapter of a book, four presentations, one declaration, two videos, three events, five web resources and one course. Numbers are still low compared to other countries of the Region and to what it is necessary to do, to know, and to share.

IL activities in Peruvian public libraries are not carried out in accordance with recommendations and guidelines. This situation is, among other reasons, a consequence of the level of development achieved by these libraries. Although countless documents from congresses, seminars and meetings emphasize the value of public libraries to society, the reality contradicts the statement. Alejos [29] indicates that they do not have a fixed budget, or modern, safe and comfortable furniture; they do not have audiovisual collections, and technical processes are not of sufficient quality due to the lack of qualified personnel.

According to the Organic Law of Municipalities (Law n. 279722), these must “organize and maintain cultural centers, libraries, theaters, and art workshops in provinces, districts and smaller communities”. The law does not specify the basic conditions for proper functioning of libraries, so this is left to the discretion or the political will of the authority.

In addition to municipalities, the National Library of Peru also has responsibilities regarding public libraries. This institution has been the entity in charge of the National System of Libraries since 1983. Public libraries were part of the system. Last year, Law n. 30034 created a new National System of Libraries that aims at improving the operation of libraries nationwide and the rational use of their services and bibliographic resources within the public policy of social inclusion, construction of citizenship and human development. The law also states that public libraries of regional governments, provincial, and district municipalities and smaller communities will be part of the system. The regulation to the law has not yet been enacted, but it is expected that it will have further clarifications on the role and responsibilities of the National Library, the regional, provincial and local governments regarding the destiny of public libraries.

As well as its traditional functions, at present the National Library offers services as the Public Library of Lima in one of its two premises in the downtown area. It also administers five Peripheral Libraries [30] in five districts of the capital city. Among their objectives, peripheral libraries aim to promote the integration of the library with the community, to promote reading habits and to organize and spread programs of library extension services.

In line with the efforts to build an information society, Peru has La Agenda Digital 2.0. [31]. It is the Plan for the Development of the Information Society in Peru and was prepared with the participation of groups of the public and private sector, academia and civil society. Its second objective is: “To integrate, expand and ensure the development of competencies so that the population has access to and can participate in the Information and Knowledge Society”. To this end four strategies

² <http://alfiniberoamerica.wikispaces.com/Per%C3%BA> (Retrieved May 24th 2014)

must be followed: to foster information literacy programs; to educate for the Information and Knowledge Society; to develop applications and contents for education in its different levels and forms, with emphasis on regular basic education; and to improve the quality of educational management through the use of ICT.

The Agenda indicates that, given the advances of ICT and the enormous amount of printed, audio-visual and electronic information that is produced every day, a new disparity is appearing due to the lack of knowledge about how to search, organize and use information as well as how to use ICT. The Agenda states that a progressive reduction of the information gap will be a public policy that will require working in conjunction with regional governments and municipalities. The Agenda considers that telecenters and Internet cafés should be added to this effort.

Internet cafés are public places that give access to Internet at a very low price. In the last fifteen years they have proliferated, particularly in urban areas, as small private businesses in all sectors of society.

4 Methodology

This is an exploratory study with an intentional non-probabilistic sampling. It is applied to public libraries of the five most populous districts in the province of Lima that serve more than three million inhabitants and represent approximately 37% of the population of the province.

Although the district of San Martín de Porres was originally on the selected list because of its 673,149 inhabitants, we were told that the public library was closed two years ago due to infrastructure problems and would probably open at the end of this year. It was therefore decided to study the public library of Villa María del Triunfo, the sixth most populous district of Lima. For the data collection a documentary study was carried out; observations were applied and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the people in charge of the libraries.

5 Results

On January 17 2014, the National Institute of Statistics and Data Processing [32] reported that Lima has 8 million 693 thousand inhabitants in its 43 districts. The five libraries selected for this study belong to the following districts:

- San Juan de Lurigancho (1,047,725 inhabitants)
- Ate (592,345 inhabitants)
- Comas (520,403 inhabitants)
- Villa El Salvador (445,189 inhabitants)
- Villa María del Triunfo (433,861 inhabitants)

Large sectors of the population of these five districts live under very difficult socioeconomic conditions, as we see in Table 1 where they are marked in bold. The table applies the socioeconomic criterion, a measure based on education, income and occupation, which means that a significant set of people share economic and social conditions that make them similar to each other. In the table, Villa El Salvador and

Villa Maria del Triunfo, two of the selected districts, have 62.7 % of the population classified in Levels D and E, that means Low inferior and Marginal levels.

Table 1. Socio-economic structure according to APEIM

Areas	Socioeconomic status				
	A: High	B: Middle	C: Upper Low	D: Low	E: Marginal
Puente Piedra, Comas , Carabayllo	0.5	11.8	39.2	40.4	8.1
San Juan de Lurigancho	0.8	10.7	37.8	40.9	9.8
Ate , Chaclacayo, Lurigancho, Santa Anita, San Luis, El Agustino	2.1	14.2	35.1	35.7	12.9
Villa el Salvador , Villa María del Triunfo , Lurín, Pachacamac	0.7	6.9	29.7	43.6	19.1

Source: Asociación Peruana de Investigación de Mercados (Peruvian Association of Market Research)
http://cpi.pe/images/upload/paginaweb/archivo/26/MR_201311_01.pdf

Although the Peruvian economic situation has improved in the last twenty years, and there has been a reduction of poverty levels, the economic growth contrasts with the presence of social problems, particularly in the urban areas: poverty, unemployment, low productivity jobs, citizen insecurity, drug addiction, problems that have become a constant concern for the government and population. This situation confirms what a recent UNDP report [33] says, "...income growth does not necessarily translate into gains in other aspects of human development. Growth may generate resources to invest in health and education, but the link is not automatic. Moreover, growth may have little impact on other important human development priorities such as participation and empowerment".

5.1 San Juan de Lurigancho

This is the largest district of Peru and has grown rapidly due to massive migration from the provinces to the capital city during the 1950s using invasions of flat free areas and the foothills. Commercial and manufacturing activities and civil construction are the most important economic activities of the district.

Its library is under the Office of Human Development Management. The person in charge, who is not a librarian, had never heard about IL and he thought it was traditional literacy. He has four years of experience working in the library, but has not so far received any training. He does not necessarily find out about training courses or other library related events because invitations do not reach the library. It is entirely up to the head of the office to send personnel to training courses.

Considering that the district has more than one million inhabitants, the collection is extremely poor and outdated. The library supports itself with private donations, which are limited. The person in charge, who feels that the library is abandoned, indicates that children and youngsters prefer to go to Internet cafés to search for information, because the library does not have all they need, although there are six computers for users, who do not receive any user instruction because, as the person in

charge said, “if they want to use the computer, they are supposed to know how to use it.” He just gives the password to the user. He mentioned that they do not have an agreement with the National Library and in recent years they have not received any support from them. The Organic Law of Municipalities states that municipalities can create and maintain libraries, cultural centers and theaters. It is in this line that San Juan de Lurigancho has built The Palace of Youth, a very modern building that offers courses about self-esteem, motivation, leadership, speed reading techniques, reading comprehension and Microsoft Office programs.

5.2 Ate

Founded in 1821, Ate is one of the oldest districts of Lima. Its population is composed mainly of migrants from different parts of the country. The majority are unskilled workers from the service sector, farm laborers and small traders. The Municipal Public Library of Ate is under the Human and Cultural Development Office. It is located within the Cultural Center of the district, which offers workshops on dance, music, theatre and leadership, as well as shows and art exhibitions. The library has nine computers for users but they must be used only for academic searches, not for entertainment. During January and February, the summer months, the library is closed to give space to gym classes and handicraft workshops, due to the fact that these programs are paid and bring profits to the Municipality. This situation annoys users and also the library assistants, who are assigned to help the workshops.

The person in charge of the library, who is a retired school teacher, had never heard about IL. He says that the library does not offer bibliographic instruction or user education. He states that the person he replaced attended training courses by the National Library in the past, but since he started working, six months ago, he has not yet attended any training course. He admits that users know more than he does about computers, so his help to users consists of turning on and turning off the computer, giving them the password and serving the circulation desk. At present they do not have any agreement with the National Library.

5.3 Comas

Comas is the fourth most populous district of the capital city. The majority of the population consists of migrants from different parts of the country. They are mainly traders, small traders and shop keepers. Some have initiated their own small and medium size enterprises. Despite its large population, Comas does not have a public municipal library and currently there are no plans to create one. The only library which is open to the public is a peripheral library that is maintained by the National Library of Peru. Peripheral libraries are located in some of the most densely populated districts of the capital city. The premises belong to the municipalities and are transferred to the National Library so that this institution is responsible for the organization and the provision of library services.

The person in charge of the library during the first shift knew of the concept of IL and indicated that some IL activities have taken place in the library in the form of

short talks for user training. This concept is mentioned in the document that describes staff duties. One of the services provided is the open shelf Reading Room Service. Library staff guides the user to locate books on the shelves and to review them according to the user's information needs. They organize talks for the appropriate use of the library service according to the following guidelines: a) To indicate in a general but clear way what type of materials the library has; b) To explain in general terms how the collection is ordered and classified. c) To make known the library regulations; and d) To explain the sense, objectives and goals of the library.

5.4 Villa El Salvador

Villa El Salvador, an iconic district, was born in 1971 as a self-managed community and emerged in response to the need for housing. It started with an invasion of publicly-owned land. At present the majority of the population is involved in commerce, services and manufacturing industries.

The municipality has created four Houses of Youth in order to prevent antisocial behavior and drug use through the promotion of artistic, cultural and educational activities. Within each House of Youth there is a library which is managed by the head of the House. The library is under the Sub-Office of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth. As in other districts, the House offers music, dance, jewelry, and sewing workshops as well as computer classes. Library staff had not heard about information literacy and do not organize any kind of user instruction or user education. They consider that whoever wants to know how to use computers must take the course that the House of Youth offers periodically, outside the library. Further, there are no computers in the libraries. The municipality has a team to promote the public libraries and, interestingly, the coordinator of the team knew the meaning of IL because he had attended a two-day workshop about IL by the National Library, although they do not have any agreement with this institution. So far, no IL activities have been implemented.

5.5 Villa María del Triunfo

The district was founded in 1961. As in the case of the other districts, it started with massive invasions of public and private land. At present, the majority of the population is involved in commerce, manufacturing industry, transport, storage and communication activities.

The library is under the Sub-Office of Youth, Education, Culture and Sport, which is in turn under the Human Development Office. The person in charge of the library is not a librarian and when she was asked if she had heard about IL, she explained what she knew about literacy campaigns. Later, she said that she had never heard that concept. They do not offer user instruction or user education courses. Library collections come from donations. She states that when a user comes for a consultation, since the library does not have an updated catalog, she suggests titles of books that will help to solve the problems; she also recommends that users read the tables of contents; she says that is the way she helps and educate users. The library,

which is also used as a place of study, does not have computers and the only one that is visible is not operating, because it has been broken for two years. She states that the municipality offers free ICT courses every week. With regard to training, she knows that the National Library offers training courses but does not get the invitations and has never attended a training course in nine years of work.

6 Conclusions

The results of the study demonstrate that the concept of IL is unknown in three out of five cases. IL activities are not carried out; the staff is not prepared to do so and do not have the adequate conditions because of library limitations: lack of qualified personnel, poor collections, lack of sufficient number of computers and connectivity. This situation prevents the libraries from contributing to combatting social exclusion by providing opportunities to improve living conditions, to enhance social capital, to bridge educational gaps in their communities. Social exclusion in many cases forces people to generate self-employment and small enterprises at their own risk, as the only way to survive. Public libraries should take into account the drive and vitality of this population in order to meet their own information needs and interests, through IL activities that empower them, that build capacities to face life and the information society in better conditions.

For centuries libraries have been associated to the written culture; our country is eminently oral, the Quechua language is basically oral. The oral culture of Peruvian population seems to have facilitated a rapid adaptation to Internet. That is why, for many sectors of the population, Internet replaces the deficiency of libraries, particularly of public libraries, which are then perceived not to be essential. The proliferation of Internet cafés and the low prices to get access to information have brought an intense use of Internet even in urban poor communities. This situation has relieved the population of the scarcity of information in public libraries, but at the same time has moved the users away from them. The strong presence of the oral culture must be taken into account when libraries design their IL activities.

It is very difficult to advance these activities in the present conditions of the five libraries that were studied. Municipalities do not perceive the social benefits of public libraries and do not invest in their improvement. The recently enacted law of the National System of Libraries raises expectations; however, it is necessary to specify responsibilities through the regulations which have not yet been implemented. The Agenda Digital 2.0 is an interesting policy document without legal force. We hope that this study will raise the level of awareness and understanding of the problem among library and information professionals, who in the great majority of cases do not work in public libraries.

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