



Re-employing Elderly Teachers in Sri Lankan Schools: Exploring Employers' Perspective

L. A. Pavithra Madhuwanthi^{1*}

¹*Department of Public Administration, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.*

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted, and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Having realized the gravity of ageing population across the world, the 2030 agenda for sustainable development calls the attention to ensure inclusive society including elderly people in the society. Hence, this paper intends to examine the employers' attitudes towards Re-employed Elderly Teachers (RETs) in the private sector schools in Sri Lanka. The data were collected through a country-wide survey using a self-administered questionnaire among the employers representing 98 private sector schools in Sri Lanka. The employers' attitudes towards the RETs were measured by using 19 attitudinal variables, ranging on a 7-point likert scale from strongly disagree (1 value) to strongly agree (7 value) and descriptive data analysis was performed. Out of the 19 attitudinal variables, employers perceived 12 variables positively. The variable that recorded the highest positive was RETs were more responsible (86.8 percent). Furthermore, employers had positive attitudes towards RETs being loyal, reliable, punctual, stress tolerant, exhibiting lower absenteeism, competence, working hard, having fewer grievances, being self-motivated, interested in new skills, and cooperative. Employers rated 3 variables attitudinal negatively. They were technological adaptability of RETs, flexibility of RETs and the cost of RETs. Among those three variables, the highest negative variable was technological adaptability of RETs (60.2 percent). As indicated by employers' attitudes, the RETs particularly need to improve their IT skills and flexibility characteristic according to the requirements of the new school environment.

*Corresponding author: Email: pavithra@sjp.ac.lk;

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Employing Elderly Teachers

The ramifications of population ageing have been fatally evident from almost all the countries in the world with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Almost all the countries in the world is experiencing growth in the size and proportion of older persons in their population ageing is everywhere in the world [1]. Sri Lanka is one of the fastest growing ageing populations in the world and currently elderly population represents 12.4% of the total population [2]. Due to the population ageing, Sri Lanka is suffering from labour market consequences when it is coupled with labour shortage in the several sectors in the economy [3]. Hence, it calls for new strategies to determine the size, structure, policies, and practices in the labour market targeting sustainable economic growth of the country. At present, Sri Lankan school education sector is one of the key areas that suffers from a dearth of qualified teachers in both the government and private sector schools.

Though the number of schools and student enrolment is rising, researchers found that delivering a quality education has been challenging due to the shortage of teachers among the schools in Sri Lanka [4,5,6]. According to the 2017 statistics from the Ministry of Education revealed that the gross student-teacher ratio of the government schools was 17 students per teacher while the private schools was 21, indicating that comparatively teacher scarcity is higher among the private sector schools [7]. The issue of the teacher shortage in Sri Lanka is multifaceted.

The inadequacy of the number of teachers in the schools is one facet. Another aspect is the mismatch between the demand for and supply of teachers, due to the absence of specialized teachers subjects which have higher demand and relevancy for the modern labour market, such as English, Science, Mathematics and Information Technology [4,6,8]. Sri Lankan government recently implemented the English medium of instruction policy (parallel to the vernacular medium of instruction) among the selected government and private schools, resulting more demand for English medium teachers. Despite that, mushrooming of international schools increased the demand for

English medium teachers who can teach national and British curricular in English medium. After adopting vernacular languages in the school education system almost for five decades and to a certain extent in the universities in Sri Lanka, it is challenging to recruit teachers that are capable of imparting subject knowledge effectively to the students in English, as they have limited knowledge in English language [8]. Those are valid arguments to justify the premise for maintaining a sufficient number of qualified teachers in the school system.

As a solution to face the teacher shortage in Sri Lanka, re-employing elderly teachers in the teaching cadre is a novel trend that has been practicing in the Sri Lankan school education system, especially among the private sector schools in Sri Lanka [9]. In this study, the definition of "a re-employed elderly teacher is one that has retired from the government school after reaching the stipulated retirement age and is employed in a private sector school in Sri Lanka." The government regulation stated that the compulsory retirement age for a government school teacher is 60, but alternatively teachers can retire between the age of 55-60 at their discretion. Consequently, the government schools do not permit to re-employ elderly teachers after the retirement. Nevertheless, there is a growing tendency of re-employing elderly teachers among the private sector schools in Sri Lanka. Re-employment of elderly/retired teachers is a common practice that has been exemplified by the schools that are facing the scarcity of teachers in many other countries [10,11,12,13].

1.2 Employers' Attitudes towards Elderly Employees

Empirical studies on elderly employment often criticize the stereotypical attitudes and age discriminatory employment practices among the employers as a major deterrent to the employment of elderly or retired employees [14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24]. However, sometimes employers perceive to have a number of positive characteristics of elderly employees such as a good work ethics, acquired knowledge and experience, loyalty to the company, dependability, a commitment to quality, and productivity [25]. The attitudes of employers towards EEs are one of the highly influential criteria regarding the recruitment decision of

elderly workers in an organization [15,26,27,28]. This phenomenon is not exceptional to the RETs in the school system as well. A study of Redman and Snape [13] in the United Kingdom had provided clear evidence of age discrimination against older teachers in recruitment regardless of teaching experience, professional qualifications, or gender. Wallace [29] pointed out that young teachers had perceived older teachers negatively as being less up to date in terms of subject knowledge, inflexible attitudes, resistance to change, and having less interest in engaging in out-of-school activities. Having considered these empirical examples, it is unlikely to expect that, those employment practices and stereotypical attitudes are differently adopted to the employed RETs in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this paper intends to examine the employers' attitudes towards re-employed elderly teachers in the private sector schools in Sri Lanka.

1.3 Private Sector Schools in Sri Lanka

The private sector schools in Sri Lanka are consisted of government aided private schools, government unaided private schools (UPS) and international schools (IS). The government aided schools are registered under the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka and the government pays the salaries of teachers, allowing those schools to charge a nominal fee from the students. Hence, those schools are called as non-fee levying schools. The majority of the schools is under the Catholic denomination and is governed by a board of management. However, the Ministry of Education conducts thorough supervision of those schools and thereby administrative autonomy is limited in those schools. In contrary, the government authority does not fund the UPSs, and thus the cost is charged from the students through an admission fee and a fee for education provided. A board of management also governs those schools. Since they are registered under the Ministry of Education, they are subject to the government supervision. However, in compared with the government aided private schools, the board of management of the UPSs has a greater freedom for administration and decision making activities.

The IS in Sri Lanka has been originated with the launching of liberal economic policies in 1977. The Board of Investment Act enacted in 1978 granted the permission to register and open up ISs as foreign business entities. However, after that the local business community invested in the

education sector and got the opportunity to register and start ISs under the Companies Act No.7 of 2007. They have registered ISs under the category of private limited liability companies. Consequently, the ISs are not registered under the Ministry of Education, no direction or the ministry could provide monitoring. Accordingly, a higher freedom is enjoyed by the board of management of the IS compared with the unaided and aided private schools in Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, the scope of this study is limited to UPSs and ISs in Sri Lanka with regard to re-employment of elderly teachers in the private sector schools. The reason for considering UPSs and ISs is the greater degree of administrative and decision-making autonomy assigned on them.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This is a quantitative study, which used descriptive statistics in analysing employers' attitudes towards RETs. A countrywide survey was carried out among the employers from the private sector schools in Sri Lanka by using a self-administered questionnaire. As stated by Van Thiel [30], the survey strategy is an efficient approach to collecting a considerable amount of data on a sizable number of variables from a large number of respondents. The attitudinal survey was carried out with 103 employers in the private sector schools representing 39 Unaided Private Schools and 64 International Schools in Sri Lanka. The respondents of the questionnaire were directors (mostly owners) and principals of the private sector schools in Sri Lanka. Respondents returned 101 questionnaires, and 3 of them were incomplete and were excluded from the sample. Hence, the sample consisted of 98 completed questionnaires. The unit of analysis in the attitudinal survey was the "individual employer.

Thoroughly reviewing the existing literature and the adopted attitudinal scales in the sphere of ageing employment, the current study was based on 19 attitudinal statements that were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 2 (disagree), 3 (somewhat disagree), 4 (neutral), 5 (somewhat agree), 6 (agree), and 7 (strongly agree).

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The study used descriptive method of data analysis by using a percentage analysis for employers' attitudes towards RETs in the private

sector schools. In addition, the study explained the nature of the schools considered and the information about the survey respondents in order to have an understanding about the sample selected for the study.

3.1 Basic Information about the Surveyed Schools

Table 1 illustrates the key information about the schools, which have been considered for the study. It provides an overview of the surveyed schools and general information about the private sector schools in Sri Lanka.

Considering the history of the schools in the sample based on the age of the school, a vast majority of the schools (out of 98) had quite a short history, less than 25 years, which is 67.3 percent. Additionally, 15.4 percent of the schools were in the 26-50 age category. Further, there were older schools that reported a history of more than 100 years (9.2 percent), which obviously were the UPSs. Since the ISs merged in Sri Lanka around the 1980s and private schools were banned after 1960, the schools

with less than 25 years' history were ISs. Further, two thirds of the schools in the sample were ISs and the rest were UPSs. In terms of the size of the schools based on the number of students, the sample was categorized into 3 groups, and nearly half of the schools were of medium size (49 percent), followed by small schools at 30.6 percent and 20.4 percent of the large schools. The representativeness of the sample was evident through the distribution of the surveyed schools across the country. There are 25 administrative districts in Sri Lanka, out of which 15 districts were considered for the study. The majority of the private sector schools are located in the Western province of Sri Lanka, which consists of only 3 districts, namely Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara, and the sample representation was 35.6, 13.0 and 6.2 percent respectively. Moreover, the central province is divided into three districts—Kandy, Matale, Nuwara-Eliya—and the sample covered the percentages of 18.7, 5.1 and 3.1 correspondingly. Briefly, it can be concluded that the composition of schools is a representative sample of the private sector schools in Sri Lanka, demonstrating a variety of attributes.

Table 1. Basic information about the surveyed schools

| Variable name | Category | Percent |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---------|
| Age of school (years) | 10 or less | 31.6 |
| | 11-25 | 35.7 |
| | 26-50 | 15.4 |
| | 51-75 | 4.0 |
| | 76-100 | 4.1 |
| | Above 100 | 9.2 |
| Type of school | Unaided Private | 35.7 |
| | International | 64.3 |
| Size of school | Small | 30.6 |
| | Medium | 49.0 |
| | Large | 20.4 |
| Location (Districts) | Colombo | 35.6 |
| | Kandy | 18.7 |
| | Gampaha | 13.0 |
| | Kalutara | 6.2 |
| | Matale | 5.1 |
| | Badulla | 4.1 |
| | Puttlum | 3.1 |
| | Matara | 3.1 |
| | Nuwala Eliya | 3.1 |
| | Kurunegala | 2.0 |
| | Jaffna | 2.0 |
| | Kegalle | 1.0 |
| | Anuradhapura | 1.0 |
| | Rathnapura | 1.0 |
| | Bandarawela | 1.0 |

Source: Survey data (2015)

3.2 Information about the Survey Respondents

The survey exploring the employers' attitudes towards RETs was carried out with 98 respondents in the private sector schools, where 63.3 percent were the principals of those schools and the rest (36.7 percent) were directors of the schools. The age distribution of the respondents ranged from 30 to 79 years, whereas a majority was in the age category of 50-59, that is 27.6 percent, followed by 21.6 percent under the 40-49 age category, and another 21.2 percent was in the 60-69 age group. The employers that were in the age groups of 30-39 and 70-79 were at 15.3 and 14.3 percent, respectively. Interestingly, the gender segregation of the respondents was maintained at a quite equal position, which was 48 and 52 percent, representing males and females correspondingly. Regarding the education background of the respondents, a vast majority of them had earned graduate or postgraduate qualifications (85 percent), while only 15 of the respondents had O/L or A/L qualifications. Further, 48 percent of the respondents had attained the postgraduate level education, denoting that almost half of the respondents, 36.7 percent, had achieved the graduate level. The respondent's service with the school meant the duration of time with the same school. Forty-two percent of the respondents were with that school for duration of 5 years or less, followed by 35 percent of the respondents

during a 6 to 10-year period. An 11 to 20-year period of service with the same school was reported by 17 percent, while interestingly 6 percent of the respondents have been serving in the same school for more than 20 years. Overall, the sample of survey respondents was captured with a variety of characteristics, by increasing the representativeness of the sample.

3.3 Employers' Attitudes towards the Elderly Teachers

The employers' attitudes towards the RETs were measured by using 19 attitudinal variables, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The Table 3 illustrates employers' rating of the attitudinal variables regarding the RETs as a percentage distribution. Positive attitudes were indicated by the percentages demonstrated under the ratings of strongly agree, agree, and somewhat agree, while the negative attitudes were reported under the ratings of strongly disagree, disagree, and somewhat disagree. The neutral attitudes denoted neither negative nor positive attitudes towards RETs.

Among the 19 variables, employers recorded the highest positive attitudes towards RETs under the variable of RETs are more responsible, at 86.8 percent (summation of 20.4, 37.8 and 28.6). Except for that variable, employers held positive attitudes about RETs being loyal (75.6 percent), reliable (74.5 percent), punctual (72.4 percent),

Table 2. Information about the survey respondents

| Variable name | Category | Percent |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| Designation | Principal | 63.3 |
| | Director | 36.7 |
| Age (years) | 30-39 | 15.3 |
| | 40-49 | 21.6 |
| | 50-59 | 27.6 |
| | 60-69 | 21.2 |
| | 70-79 | 14.3 |
| Gender | Male | 48.0 |
| | Female | 52.0 |
| Education | O/L* | 2.0 |
| | A/L** | 14.0 |
| | Graduate | 36.0 |
| | Postgraduate | 48.0 |
| Duration with the school (years) | 5 or below | 41.8 |
| | 6-10 | 34.7 |
| | 11-15 | 13.3 |
| | 16-20 | 4.1 |
| | Above 20 | 6.1 |

*O/L- Ordinary Level; **A/L- Advanced Level

Source: Survey data (2015)

Table 3. Percentage distribution of employers' attitudinal variables

| Variables | Degree of agreement | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|----------|-------------------|---------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Somewhat disagree | Neutral | Somewhat agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
| RETs are more Responsible than YTs* | 0.0 | 6.1 | 1.0 | 6.1 | 20.4 | 37.8 | 28.6 |
| RETs are more Punctual than YTs | 1.0 | 6.1 | 5.1 | 15.3 | 16.3 | 34.7 | 21.4 |
| RETs are more Loyal than YTs | 1.0 | 10.2 | 1.0 | 12.2 | 18.4 | 29.6 | 27.6 |
| RETs are more Cooperative than YTs | 2.0 | 13.3 | 5.1 | 29.6 | 15.3 | 18.4 | 16.3 |
| RETs are more Stress tolerant than YTs | 0.0 | 9.2 | 5.1 | 20.4 | 12.2 | 32.7 | 20.4 |
| RETs Work harder than YTs | 0.0 | 9.2 | 6.1 | 22.4 | 17.3 | 28.6 | 16.3 |
| RETs are more Reliable than YTs | 1.0 | 11.2 | 2.0 | 11.2 | 13.3 | 44.9 | 16.3 |
| RETs have fewer Grievances than YTs | 2.0 | 17.3 | 6.1 | 18.4 | 16.3 | 33.7 | 6.1 |
| RETs are more Competent than YTs | 1.0 | 13.3 | 6.1 | 16.3 | 20.4 | 27.6 | 15.3 |
| RETs are less Costly than YTs | 9.2 | 25.5 | 14.3 | 15.3 | 7.1 | 25.5 | 3.1 |
| RETs are more Creative than YTs | 1.0 | 16.3 | 10.2 | 27.6 | 23.5 | 15.3 | 6.1 |
| RETs are more Efficient than YTs | 4.1 | 21.4 | 7.1 | 25.5 | 19.4 | 16.3 | 6.1 |
| RETs exhibit lower Absenteeism | 0.0 | 11.2 | 11.2 | 13.3 | 8.2 | 39.8 | 16.3 |
| RETs' Quality of work is higher | 6.1 | 29.6 | 6.1 | 19.4 | 7.1 | 24.5 | 7.1 |
| RETs are more Technology adaptable | 4.1 | 31.6 | 24.5 | 20.4 | 11.2 | 8.2 | 0.0 |
| RETs are more Flexible | 1.0 | 25.5 | 25.5 | 16.3 | 10.2 | 14.3 | 7.1 |
| RETs are more Self-motivated | 2.0 | 17.3 | 14.3 | 13.3 | 11.2 | 32.7 | 9.2 |
| RETs prefer more Responsibility | 3.1 | 20.4 | 15.3 | 12.2 | 6.1 | 31.6 | 11.2 |
| RETs are more interested in New skills | 4.1 | 16.3 | 11.2 | 15.3 | 16.3 | 28.6 | 8.2 |

YTs* - Younger Teachers

Source: Survey data (2015)

stress tolerant (65.3 percent), exhibiting lower absenteeism (64.3 percent), competence (63.3 percent), working hard (62.2 percent), having fewer grievances (56.1 percent), being self-motivated (53.1 percent), interested in new skills (53.1 percent) and cooperative (50 percent).

The employers rated three variables as negative attitudes towards RETs. The highest negative rating was reported for the technological adaptability of RETs, at 60.2 percent (summation of 4.1, 31.6 and 24.5). Additionally, the employers had negative attitudes about the flexibility of the RETs (52 percent) and employers considered RETs as costly (49 percent).

The results found in the study were consistent with the researches, which were carried out on ageing employment in other sectors as well. A Sweden study, comprised of 147 private sector employers representing four industries (trade, manufacturing, construction, and transport) revealed positive attitudes about elderly employees such as knowledgeable, competent, loyal, recording low absenteeism, motivated, taking responsibilities [28]. Also a qualitative study carried out with 42 employers in England representing variety of industries and different organizational size informed that employers positively admired elderly employees as wise, reliable, strong work ethic, easier to manage, punctual, good in customer care, less job turnover, good in mental arithmetic, mature in attitudes, tolerate work pressure [31].

A quantitative study used a sample of 1855 employers from four European countries (Greece, Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) concluded that elderly employees have poor capacity to deal with new technologies indicating a negative perception [27]. Another global attitude survey carried out among the 6230 private sector employers in 21 countries in 2005 found that elderly employees were less technologically oriented, less flexible, and costly labour [32].

4. CONCLUSION

Considering the overall result of the study, among the 19 attitudinal variables, it was interesting to note that majority of the attitudinal variables (12 variables) were positive regarding the RETs in the private sector schools, which means employers tend to have positive attitudes towards RETs. It is a good sign for the RETs in the private sector schools in Sri Lanka. Out of them, employers more positively perceived the

responsible nature of RETs, their reliability, punctuality, loyalty, stress tolerance, competence, lower absenteeism, and hard work. Nonetheless, the employers indicated negative attitudes towards the technological adaptability and flexibility of the RETs and the RETs were considered as costly.

As indicated by employers' attitudes, the RETs particularly need to improve their IT skills and flexibility characteristic according to the requirements of the new school environment. Developing IT skills among RETs would be an individual responsibility of the RETs, because the employers in the schools considered RETs are costly and it is unlikely the schools incur additional efforts to provide IT training to RETs, neither the government. As to increase the employability among the RETs improving IT skills will be a useful measure.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

As per international standard or university standard guideline participant consent and ethical approval has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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