

The Impact of Socio-Economic Factors on Student Dropout

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, the incidence of students dropping out of school education has been increasing. This situation negatively affects students' future lives and has also become a factor influencing the educational development trajectory of Sri Lanka. Against this background, this study was conducted to examine the impact of socio-economic factors on student dropout in Tamil-medium secondary schools in Division 01 of the Nuwara Eliya Education Zone in Sri Lanka. The objectives of the study were to identify: the current status of student dropout; the economic and social factors influencing dropout; and the measures taken at the school level to reduce student dropout. The study was designed using a descriptive survey method and a mixed-method approach. Eighteen Tamil-medium secondary schools were selected for the study. Using purposive sampling, 54 teachers, 18 principals, 44 parents, and 66 dropout students were selected as the sample. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including mean and standard deviation, as well as thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the average dropout rate over the past three years was 25%. The dropout rate was higher among male students compared to female students, and higher among students in Grades 9–11 compared to those in Grades 6–8. Among the economic factors, parental poverty ($M = 4.8$) and living separately from parents ($M = 4.7$) had a very high level of influence. Additionally, failure to meet basic needs ($M = 3.8$) and parents' occupational status ($M = 3.7$) showed a moderately high level of influence. Among the social factors, early marriage ($M = 4.6$), engagement in household work or urban employment ($M = 4.6$), and family problems ($M = 4.7$) had a very high level of influence. Similarly, association with over-age peers ($M = 3.9$) and sexual abuse ($M = 3.9$) were found to have a moderately high impact. Furthermore, the study found that the measures implemented at the school level to reduce student dropout were neither sufficient nor satisfactory. It is suggested that student dropout can be reduced to some extent through the effective and collaborative implementation of activities aimed at promoting students' continuous learning.

Key Words: Student dropout, School, Socio-economic factors

INTRODUCTION

Education is recognized as a fundamental human right. Accordingly, education should be provided to all in an equitable and quality-oriented manner (Kirubalan & Sivananthan, 2026). In this context, when children who attend school leave before completing their education, it is defined as student dropout (Janani, 2023). According to the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education Circular (2008/39), if a student does not attend school continuously for 41 days, he or she is considered a dropout. Although the policy of compulsory education for all has been implemented, many students still face various obstacles in continuing their education. Maslow's Theory of Needs emphasizes that students can focus on and engage in learning only when their basic needs are fulfilled. Accordingly, when examining the socio-economic factors influencing student dropout, it becomes evident that there is a relationship between dropout and unmet social and economic needs.

Social, economic, violence-related, and gender-based inequalities contribute to school dropout (UNICEF, 2021). As a result, a large proportion of students from socially and economically disadvantaged families are unable to continue their education to completion (Vijayasekar, 2020). In a study conducted by Geetha and Salana (2021), it was revealed that poverty is a major factor contributing to students dropping out of school. Furthermore,

economic difficulties, lack of parental interest, and school fees have been identified as additional causes of student dropout (Latif et al., 2015). In the period following the COVID-19 crisis, reduced employment opportunities and increased economic expenses have also influenced student dropout rates (Atat et al., 2023).

In a study conducted by Ana Perez (2021), it was found that in many countries, boys drop out at higher rates than girls at the school level. The study further revealed that male students often leave school due to pressure to work to support family income or due to peer influence. Michael O (2024) found in his study that parental mental health issues or substance abuse frequently lead to financial crises and social isolation within families, which in turn pushes students to leave school in order to support their families. Additionally, Gunawardhana (2019) revealed that discontinuing education midway weakens students' quality of life, pushes them into economic decline, limits their access to quality employment, and often results in their continued engagement in low-paid wage labor.

In this background, in the Tamil-medium schools in Division I of the Nuwara Eliya Education Zone in Sri Lanka, an average of 24 students have dropped out from the secondary section over the past three years. Of these, 66% are male students and 34% are female students (Nuwara Eliya Education Zone Development Division, 2024). Such school dropout adversely affects students' learning development as well as their opportunities to gain social experiences. Therefore, this study has been undertaken with the aim of identifying how socio-economic factors influence student dropout.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the current status of student dropout.
2. To determine the economic factors influencing student dropout.
3. To identify the social factors affecting student dropout.
4. To analyze the measures implemented at the school level to minimize student dropout.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The contribution of parents to the academic achievement of students is essential (Sivananthan & Wedikandage, 2023). Furthermore, extrinsic motivational factors—such as tangible rewards, competitive environments, and parental involvement increase students' involvement in education (Athirathan, 2024). Therefore, Parental separation, whether due to divorce, migration, or financial constraints, poses substantial challenges not only to children's emotional and psychological well-being but also to their academic progress (Luxmanathan & Sivananthan, 2026). Accordingly, lack of parental encouragement, parental death, and separation are identified as factors that contribute to student dropout (Geethavini & Udayakumar, 2014).

In a study conducted by Subatharsini (2016), it was found that factors such as inappropriate teaching methods, long distance to school, lack of interest in learning, inadequate housing facilities, insufficient attention to children, and difficulties in providing necessary learning materials contribute to student dropout. The study also identified the growth of social media and fascination with modern lifestyle trends as additional factors influencing dropout.

Although family-related factors are significant, Seetha and Kalana (2021) found that social factors are equally important in contributing to student dropout. Despite the Sri Lankan government providing free education, estate-sector students tend to neglect this opportunity and drop out of school (Thibakaran, 2016). It has also been noted that increased academic workload and health issues contribute to student dropout (Gonzalez, 2023). Furthermore, students who drop out of school face various social problems. In particular, they lose opportunities to gain broad knowledge and may develop narrow perspectives. In the future, they may become dependent on others even to fulfill their basic needs. They are also more vulnerable to deviant behaviors and may fail to adhere to social norms and ethical standards (Smith, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a descriptive survey research design. Eighteen Tamil-medium secondary schools in Education Division–01 of the Nuwara Eliya Education Zone in Sri Lanka were selected for the study. Using purposive sampling, two teachers from each school who teach in the junior secondary section (36 teachers) and one teacher from each school who teaches in the senior secondary section (18 teachers) were selected, making a total sample of 54 teachers. In addition, 18 principals, 44 parents, and 66 dropout students were also selected as part of the sample.

Primary data were collected through questionnaires and interviews, while secondary data were obtained from documents. The data collection instruments were prepared after obtaining appropriate expert consultation. They were pilot tested, necessary revisions were made, and then finalized. The quantitative data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods such as mean and standard deviation, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Based on the objectives of the study, the collected data were analyzed and interpreted as follows.

Current Status of Student Dropout

Based on data obtained from the Nuwara Eliya Education Zone and school records, the current status of student dropout has been analyzed and presented in the following table.

Table 1: Detail of Students - Dropout

Year	Dropout	Gender-wise Dropout		Grade-wise Dropout				
				Gr 06	Gr 07	Gr 08	Gr 09	Gr 10 - 11
		Male	Female					
2024	25%	66%	34%	14%	17%	18%	22%	29%
2023	23%	60%	40%	13%	17%	19%	24%	27%
2022	26%	68%	32%	13%	16%	18%	23%	30%

According to the table, the student dropout rate was 26% in 2022, 23% in 2023, and 25% in 2024. Among them, the average dropout rate of male students is above 60%, whereas the average dropout rate of female students is below 40%. Based on grade levels, the average dropout rate is approximately 16% between Grades 6–8, about 18% in Grade 9, and around 29% between Grades 10–11. Therefore, the dropout rate is higher among male students than female students. Similarly, dropout is higher in Grades 9–11 compared to Grades 6–8.

Economic Factors Influencing Student Dropout

The economic factors influencing student dropout were measured using 24 variables. These were categorized into seven major factors:

1. Insufficient basic needs
2. Parents’ poverty status
3. Engagement in part-time employment

4. Obtaining loans for educational purposes
5. Living separately from parents
6. Large number of siblings in the family
7. Parents' occupational status

Regarding these factors, the mean scores and standard deviations were calculated based on the responses of teachers and principals, and the results are presented in the following table.

Here, responses were measured using a Likert scale with the following levels:

- Very High – 5 (4.5 – 5.0)
- High – 4 (3.5 – 4.4)
- Low – 3 (2.5 – 3.4)
- Very Low – 2 (1.5 – 2.4)
- Not at All – 1 (1.0 – 1.4)

Table 2: Economic Factors Influencing Student Dropout

Variable	Teacher Responses			Principal Responses		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
V1	54	3.03	1.05	18	3.23	1.25
V2	54	4.91	0.83	18	4.82	1.08
V3	54	3.31	0.81	18	3.23	0.92
V4	54	3.96	0.89	18	3.74	0.95
V5	54	4.67	0.92	18	4.87	0.73
V6	54	3.00	0.93	18	3.06	0.82
V7	54	3.70	1.31	18	3.72	1.25

According to Table 2, teachers' responses indicate that (V2) parents' poverty status (M = 4.91, SD = 0.83) and (V5) living separately from parents (M = 4.67, SD = 0.92) have exerted a very high level of influence on student dropout. Similarly, principals' responses also reveal that (V2) (M = 4.82, SD = 1.08) and (V5) (M = 4.87, SD = 0.73) have exerted a very high level of influence. Likewise, teachers' and principals' responses indicate that (V4) Obtaining loans for educational purposes (Teachers: M = 3.96, SD = 0.89; Principals: M = 3.74, SD = 0.95) and (V7) Parents' occupational status (3.70, SD = 1.31; Principals: M = 3.72, SD = 1.25) have exerted a high level of influence.

However, teachers' and principals' responses show that (V1) insufficient basic needs (Teachers: M = 3.03, SD = 1.05; Principals: M = 3.23, SD = 1.25), (V3) Engagement in part-time employment (Teachers: M = 3.31, SD = 0.81; Principals: M = 3.23, SD = 0.92), and (V6) large number of siblings in the family (Teachers: M = 3.0, SD = 0.93; Principals: M = 3.06, SD = 0.82) have exerted a low level of influence.

Furthermore, qualitative data obtained through focus group discussions with parents were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that poverty, parental separation, obtaining loans for educational purposes, and parents’ occupational status had a strong influence on student dropout. Similarly, interviews conducted with dropout students indicated the insufficient basic needs, engagement in part-time employment and large number of siblings in the family had a comparatively lower level of influence on dropout.

Social Factors Influencing Student Dropout

The social factors influencing student dropout were measured using 32 variables. These were classified into 12 major factors:

1. Social pressure and harassment
2. Parents’ educational level
3. Lack of social support
4. Family problems
5. Sexual abuse
6. Drug use
7. Early marriage
8. Teenage marriage
9. Engagement in domestic work or urban employment
10. Stress or psychological problems
11. Exposure to sudden accidents or disasters
12. Association with over-age peers

Regarding these factors, the mean scores and standard deviations of teachers’ and principals’ responses were calculated, and the results are presented in the following table.

Table 3: Social Factors Influencing Student Dropout

Variable	Teacher Responses			Principal Responses		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
V1	54	3.26	1.02	18	3.06	1.22
V2	54	3.65	0.86	18	3.65	0.86
V3	54	4.54	0.63	18	4.84	0.73
V4	54	1.32	1.75	18	1.26	1.23
V5	54	3.91	0.73	18	3.82	0.56
V6	54	2.38	1.05	18	2.36	1.25

V7	54	4.65	0.76	18	4.63	0.86
V8	54	1.43	0.80	18	1.12	0.86
V9	54	4.53	0.69	18	4.82	0.56
V10	54	1.02	0.81	18	1.36	0.85
V11	54	2.43	1.10	18	2.32	1.12
V12	54	3.94	0.76	18	3.83	0.66

According to Table 3, teachers’ and principals’ responses indicate that (V7) Early marriage (Teachers: $M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.76$; Principals: $M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.86$), (V9) Engagement in domestic work or urban employment (Teachers: $M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.69$; Principals: $M = 4.82$, $SD = 0.56$), and (V3) Lack of social support (Teachers: $M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.63$; Principals: $M = 4.84$, $SD = 0.73$) exerted a very high level of influence on student dropout. Similarly, (V12) Association with over-age peers (Teachers: $M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.76$; Principals: $M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.66$) and (V5) Sexual abuse (Teachers: $M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.73$; Principals: $M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.56$) exerted a high level of influence.

Conversely, (V11) Exposure to sudden accidents or disasters (Teachers: $M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.10$; Principals: $M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.12$), (V1) Social pressure and harassment (Teachers: $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.02$; Principals: $M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.22$), and (V6) Drug use (Teachers: $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.05$; Principals: $M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.25$) exerted a low level of influence. In addition, factors (V4, V8, V10) were found to have no measurable influence on student dropout.

Through interviews conducted with dropout students and focus group discussions held with parents, the qualitative data obtained were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that association with older peers among male students and their interest in seeking employment in urban areas influenced dropout. Among some female students, involvement in caring for younger siblings, assisting their mothers in plucking tea leaves, entering into early marriage, and being employed in domestic work in urban areas were identified as factors that contributed to dropout.

Measures Implemented at the School Level to Minimize Student Dropout

Through thematic analysis of the qualitative data obtained from principals and teachers regarding the measures taken at the school level to reduce student dropout, the following findings were identified:

Although support programs were implemented to encourage students facing economic hardships to continue their education, these initiatives were not sustained consistently. Efforts to prevent student dropout through collaboration with the community were not carried out adequately. Since students who experience academic difficulties are more likely to drop out of school, there has been a lack of special intervention programs designed specifically to prevent such dropout. Although home visits were conducted to bring back students with irregular attendance, the continuous implementation of these measures has not been successful. Furthermore, although the compulsory education program is being implemented in schools, it has not been carried out in a structured and consistent manner.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It was found that the average dropout rate over the past three years was approximately 25%. Among these, the dropout rate was higher among male students than female students. Similarly, dropout was higher among students in Grades 9–11 compared to Grades 6–8.

Regarding economic factors influencing student dropout, parents’ poverty status and living separately from parents ($M = 4.5–5.0$) were found to have a very high level of influence. Likewise, obtaining loans and parents’

occupational status ($M = 3.5-4.4$) were found to have a moderately high level of influence. Furthermore, thematic analysis of parents' responses also confirmed that these economic factors exerted a strong influence on student dropout.

With regard to social factors influencing student dropout, early marriage, engagement in domestic work or urban employment, and family problems ($M = 4.5-5.0$) were found to have a very high level of influence. Similarly, association with over-age peers and sexual abuse ($M = 3.5-4.4$) were identified as having a moderately high level of influence. Thematic analysis of parents' responses further confirmed that these social factors had a significant impact on student dropout. Furthermore, this study found that the measures implemented at the school level to minimize student dropout were neither sufficient nor satisfactory.

The above findings of this study are consistent with the results of previous research. In particular, the study conducted by Das and Saha (2014) found that parents' lack of education, large family size, and poverty exacerbate dropout problems. Similarly, the study conducted by Geethavani and Uthayakumar (2014) identified family environment, peer association, insufficient income, lack of parental encouragement, parental death, and separation as factors that contribute to student dropout.

Furthermore, although family factors are significant, social factors also exert equal importance in influencing dropout, as highlighted by Seetha and Kalana (2021). Gupta et al., (2021) pointed out that preventive mechanisms to address student dropout in advance are generally lacking in schools, and that measures taken after students have already dropped out often fail. These research findings are in agreement with the results of the present study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continuous awareness and counselling programs should be provided to parents regarding the importance of education and how it can transform a student's future. Since students who face learning difficulties are more likely to drop out, schools should identify the specific subjects in which a student is experiencing difficulty and implement special intervention programs accordingly.

Through the school's alumni association, programs that motivate dropout students to return to education and initiatives that support dropout prevention activities can be organized. Strengthening the relationship between the school and the community can also help control dropout. In addition to the existing School Development Committee, a separate committee should be established to enhance students' educational progress. This committee should engage in productive discussions to encourage students to study at home and to increase parental involvement and participation in school activities (Sivananthan, 2021). Furthermore, the Compulsory Education Committee should be made to function effectively within the school, and its activities should be fully implemented.

Therefore, by taking the above recommendations into consideration, school administration, the Ministry of Education, the Department of Education, community members, and other government institutions should collaborate in proper planning and effective implementation to reduce the level of student dropout to a certain extent.

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