

An Analysis of Family Influences on School Dropouts in Welimada Division, Sri Lanka: Evidence from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The issue of school dropout rates remains a significant concern in education systems worldwide, posing challenges to academic achievement and societal progress. This is particularly a challenge in rural area in Sri Lankan environment where economic poverty and family instability are still forcing students out of the formal education system. This study aimed to identify the family-related factors affecting dropouts in school education with perspectives from teachers in the Welimada division in Sri Lanka. Based on the qualitative research method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 teachers within the Welimada division based on the purposive sampling method and thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings. The key findings reveal that low family income, and unstable family structure significantly contribute to the school dropout rates as financial hardships, lack of stability and minimal parental involvement affect students' ability to sustain regular attendance. Moreover, since the family represents the closest and most effectible connection to the students, its overall environment exerts a profound impact on their education continuity. To reduce the school dropouts, the study proposes policy measures such as strengthening parental active involvement, promoting lifelong learning and increasing the awareness of the importance of formal education. These measures collectively strengthen the support system around students, motivate continuous attendance and foster positive attitude toward the long-term value of education.

Keywords: School Dropouts, Education, Policy Options, Welimada, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of Study

Education is a lifelong process that begins in early childhood and lasts throughout an individual's life. Formal, informal, and non-formal learning experiences occur in a variety of settings, including schools, universities, society, families, and businesses. School education plays a significant role in creating fundamental social assets such as how to read, write, and communicate as well as in preparing them to fit into society through improving the attributes along with intelligence and ability of the students (Silva & Rathnayake, 2024). Free education policy has been in practice in Sri Lanka from October 1945 with the ultimate objective of providing educational facilities to all the children of this country from the primary to the university level (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment & Tourism Sri Lanka, 2022). Consequently, school can be presented as the paramount social necessity in the lives of people (Silva & Rathnayake, 2024). Although there is free access to education, persistent challenges, such as the issue of school dropouts, still hinder its full potential. The World Bank (2022) reports that a considerable number of children and youth are out of school across the globe, proving that school dropouts are current burning issues still discussed on global agenda. Dropping out of school education means leaving school before completing the relevant stage of education, resulting in no certification (Naich et al., 2023). There is a great need for research to explore the factors affecting dropouts in school education. Among these factors such as student, family, school and society related, family-related factors play a significant role since family is the primary support system of students' development and opportunities. In addition, while other factors have been more extensively studied, Dayasiri et al. (2024), Mayadunne and Kariyasekara (2021) and Vithanage (2022) research focusing on family-related factors remains comparatively limited. Therefore, identifying the family-related factors is crucial as the research findings help to reduce school dropouts. Hence, the main objective of this study is to investigate the factors affecting school dropouts in rural divisions in the Uva province in Sri Lanka.

The factors affecting dropping out of schooling, unless understood and addressed, will result in substantial costs to society (Perera, 2012) and considering the Uva Province's lower academic performance compared to other provinces, the Badulla district reflects more educational challenges than other districts. Badulla comprises of fourteen education divisions, totaling 601 government schools, including twenty-seven national schools. Badulla has mixed dropout rates among grade levels with current school census 2022/2023 demonstrating that some grades especially Grade 9 and 10 recorded higher student dropout rates of more than 2% which indicates that there is still a challenge in retaining students in schools (Student Census report, 2023).

The Welimada education division has 110 government schools providing education from primary level to advanced level (Statistics branch of Ministry of Education, 2025). This division may be known for a higher tendency of dropouts in the Badulla district (Student Census Report, 2024). In all government schools within the Welimada division, the number of Grade 9 students in 2023 was 2747, while in 2024 the number of Grade 10 students was 2668 (Student Census Report, 2024). According to the latest statistics above, within a short period of one year, the number of students who came from Grade 9 to Grade 10 has decreased by 79, which means they have dropped out of their school education (Student Census Report, 2024). Despite the critical nature of this dropout phenomena, there is limited research addressing how family-related factors affect school dropouts. Although several studies by Dayasiri et al. (2024), Mayadunne and Kariyasekara (2021) and Vithanage (2022) identified the economic, student related, school related, social and psychological factors influencing school dropouts, there is a lack of focus on family-related factors, particularly in the Sri Lankan context. Tsolou and Babalis (2020) and Mishara (2014) have identified family-related factors as strong predictors of dropout. Prior research has focused on estate and urban areas of Sri Lanka (Solangaarachchi, 2021; Vithanage, 2022).

Although school dropouts have been studied in other regions of Sri Lanka, there is still a lack of research on this issue, particularly in the Welimada Division, a semi-rural area. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the perspectives of teachers, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the family-related factors affecting school dropouts in a semi-rural context.

The increase in school dropouts weakens the country's total education level and undermines its development. When the number of students who complete school education decreases, it has a long-term impact on human capital, productivity, and national growth (World Bank, 2022).

Dropping out also reduces students' future work opportunities, limits their income capacity, and lowers their living standards, increasing their risk of poverty. Since the family is students' closest and most influential environment, it is critical to identify the factors related to family to prevent school dropouts.

The research objectives of the study are given below;

- To identify family-related factors affecting school dropouts in the Welimada Division, Uva Province, Sri Lanka.
- To provide policy measures to reduce the school dropouts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Education

Education is the most effective way of achieving knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is a critical factor vital to the development of any nation and plays an incremental role in the estimation of a country's productivity (Fernando, 2017). Further, education is the field that refers to learning processes that took place in school or institutions and is distinguished from many non-formal and informal modes of acquiring socialization (Perera, 2012). The school provides students with their initial formal education. The success of the school system depends on various contexts. Regarding the context of teachers, the quality of the knowledge delivery depends on teacher-student relationship, occupational stress and progressive mindset combined with their mental and physical health status (Jennifer & Jayasinghe, 2025). Therefore, education does not involve a single path but multiple paths including school, students, family and teachers etc.

2.2. School Dropouts

School dropout can be defined as an individual who does not attend school and does not move forward from one level to another. This decision to pull out of school can be made at any level of schooling based on the education system adopted in that given country whether it is primary, secondary or tertiary level (Mahrool, 2020). Primary education is an important building block not just for students' development but for society (Jennifer & Jayasinghe, 2025). In the same manner secondary and tertiary education play equally vital roles. Dropouts commonly stop going to school and often do not complete school education. Hence, they could fail in trials to gain knowledge, skills, and certifications they require for their further academic and career endeavors (Hermogenes et al., 2014).

2.3. Related Theories

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains how children's development is shaped by multiple environmental systems, with the family-related factors forming the core microsystem. It emphasizes that interactions within the family such as parenting style, emotional support, and family relationships play a central role in shaping a child's social, emotional and cognitive development (Guy-Evans, 2024).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory clearly explains how family-related factors, like family income, family structure and parental participation all have direct impact on students and their learning environment (Guy-Evans, 2024).

As per, Social Capital Theory social relations and resources help student education continuity in the way of relationships, norms and interactions that further assist by

providing emotional support, guidance, information and access to resources with persistence and goal attainments, especially the socioeconomic status (Plagens, 2011). Based on this theory one tends to believe that social relations affect students and school performance, underlining the function of social relationships in education.

Socioeconomic status of the family is primarily related to Social Capital Theory, which identifies the quality of relationship between family members, the well-established socioeconomic status of the family supports student's education continuity (Plagens, 2011). Collectively these theories explain how the family income, socioeconomic status, parental participation and family structure contribute to school continuity or dropout.

Thus, socioeconomic status of the family including family income, parental involvement and family structures are mainly identified as the family-related factors affecting the dropouts in school education under the theoretical framework of the present study (Das & Mane, 2017).

Family income is one of the main factors related to students' school education. When parents earn a very low income, they do not encourage schooling because they cannot provide for their children's needs; cannot spend time helping them with their studies or with other chores, as they must work for the family's survival. On the other hand, their children have to work to support their family (Das & Mane, 2017). Poor families have to find tuition fees, uniforms, books, transport fees and other necessities for their children. This creates financial stress that can be associated with anxiety and depression for their families and thus students leaving school education before completing relevant level (Sandamali, 2016). Family economic constraint and lack of money to purchase stationary are some causes for dropping out of school education in the Sainthamaruthu division in Sri Lanka (Iyas, 2018).

Thus, socioeconomic status of the family plays an important role in students' education. Families who do not have a high educational background have difficulty in both helping their children with school homework and tackling educational obstacles (Shamila & Rajasingam, 2017). Poor and less educated families appear to generate less capable students than richer and more educated families; nonetheless, students from economically and educationally advantaged families have low voluntary dropout rates and high rates of passing examinations (Fortes et al., 2024). Further, illegal relationships of parents, alcoholism, domestic violence, and conflicts are also causes for students' education dropout. The resilient lifestyle of parents and brothers, temporary jobs and dissatisfaction with salary and low level of income are other factors (Solangaarachchi, 2021). These causes create unstable and hostile environment that can negatively affect students' wellbeing and academic performances. Further, in Sri Lanka, parental illiteracy, neglect from parents, divorce

and parent's extramarital affairs are some other causes that contribute to dropout rates (Ashani & Gunasekara, 2019).

Low parental participation may lead to school dropouts since parents cannot support learning, communicating with teachers, and motivating students to achieve in school, hence leading to failure and dropout (Park, 2006). When parents are disengaged, there are no chances to monitor children's performance, attendance and progress, leading to higher absenteeism, and poor performances (Sandamali, 2016). Additionally, lack of communication between school and parents can prevent early interventions in academic issues. This lack of involvement creates more tendency for students dropping out of school (HeavyRunne & DeCelles, 2002). Similarly, family plays crucial role as the principal transmitter of knowledge, values, attitudes and habits. In Sri Lanka, parental migration, working in distant areas, parents' low interest are some causes for low parental participation (Perera, 2012).

Families in rural households tend to be associated with the agricultural sector, home based industries, manual labor etc (Perera, 2012). Therefore, on the one hand parents of such families cannot afford extra costs of their children's education. On the other hand, some children of such families have no option but to participate in earning activities to support their parents. Consequently, such children dropout of school before completing their education (Perera, 2012).

Considering the Sri Lankan context, family-related challenges have a significant impact on student retention in school. Many families struggle with insufficient or inconsistent income making it difficult to afford books and pay tuition (Iyas, 2018). Some parents are occupied with their jobs or related fields (most of them are farmers), leaving them unable to monitor their students' education (Ashani & Gunasekara, 2019). Some parents prioritize early marriages (especially those of female students), sibling chores or family feuds over education (Perera, 2012). Such challenges in typical families create an environment in which children lose motivation, frequently abandon school, and are more likely to dropout (Silva & Rathnayake, 2024).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research methods are used to observe the teachers' perspectives regarding family-related factors affecting dropouts in school education. According to the Ministry of Education (2017), the total teacher population in the Welimada division is 2717 teachers, which represents the populations for the study. The selection of participants was based on identifying schools that reported high dropout rates within the Welimada division. Thirty teachers of Grades 10 and 11 from various schools in the Welimada division of the Uva province in Sri Lanka were selected as participants, through a purposive sampling method. Teachers who are very engaged with students

like discipline teachers, class teachers, sports teachers participated under the purposive sampling technique. Prior to the interviews, participants were given the information sheet and the consent form and explained the purpose of this research. A maximum of thirty minutes was taken per participant. In-depth interviews, involving detailed, open-ended conversations between the interviewer and the participant, were carried out as it facilitated to capture rich and nuanced insights directly from the perspectives of teachers. Narrative analysis was utilized as a data analysis method. As a way of enhancing validity and reliability of this study, a pilot study was conducted using five participants from the target populations prior to the data collection. In addition, theoretical understanding obtained from the literature review contributed to the validity of the interview guide. To ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, anonymous names were assigned to the participants by eliminating their identification at any point of the research process.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis was carried out under the narratives of socioeconomic status of the family including family income, parental involvement, and family structure.

4.1. Family Income

The financial stability of families determines whether children will stay in school due to its direct influence on educational resources.

“When parents lose their financial resources, children lose the opportunity to purchase uniforms, shoes, bags, food and even maintain school related necessities. In such a situation, some students are isolated. Even though they want to go to school, they don’t have the ability to do so” (a respondent).

“Many boys of Grade 10 and 11 who are in our area are already engaged in some jobs. In some cases, they are the main source of income for their family, so these students do not think about their education anymore, they want to strengthen their family income” (a respondent).

Based on the participants’ views, family income is linked with the school dropout tendency. Lack of good nutrition, uniforms, and school necessities, school absenteeism and dropping out of the children in low-income families were the main issues emphasized by the participants.

Moreover, *“Some parents are economically poor. But they strongly believe that even though they are poor, they should educate their children well and help them to reach high positions one day. Even though, we can see many cases where their children's education is hindered because of being poor”* (a respondent).

“Some students leave school and work to support the family. Most of the girls after the Ordinary Level (O/L) are now working in garment factories” (a respondent).

Some girls who complete their (O/L) examinations abandon their education and finding work at garment factories is evidence of how economic factors discourage students from further education.

It is evident that the absence of financial stability within the family usually forces students to stop their education and look for work to help the family. For instance, according to the findings some girls and boys, who are still studying, find employment and sometimes become the main income source of the family. They tend to abandon their education and support the financial needs of their family. Thus, the education related costs remain unaffordable for families living below the poverty line, especially in rural settings like the Welimada Division.

It is evident that the financial struggle of the family is one of the main factors causing dropouts from school education.

The findings are consistent with the previous research. Low-income families often force their children to work in order to earn money for their families, and that restricts them to access school (Das & Mane, 2017; Sandamali, 2016).

4.2. Parental Educational and Occupational Level

Students' school education continuity is affected by family socioeconomic status, as it determines how well parents can secure educational resources for their children.

“Most parents in our school have lower educational qualifications. Hence, their children do not receive adequate support for education from their parents. If we observe children who have given up education, the environment in their homes is like this” (a respondent).

Parents who have lower educational levels generally show less knowledge about the value of education as well as their poor ability to help with school related matters that lead to academic challenges.

“In fact, if we look at the students who dropped out of school last year, there are such issues related to their family; for example, their mother has remarried, or their father, or their mother's new husband. Sometimes parents get married at a young age, and because of these reasons, the parents do not care about the students and do not look after the children. As a result, children are not safe and therefore not motivated to study” (a respondent).

The parental marriage issues similarly create dropout hazards through emotional distress, family disputes, and decreased parenting support. These family changes

sometimes lead students to feel insecure and neglected, therefore affecting their school education.

The educational and occupational level of parents is one of the most important factors affecting the continuity of students' education. In rural areas, parents give less value to education than in urban areas, and therefore they view school as a day care center. This has happened because parents must work until late, and in the meantime, they send their children to school. They have no idea about the value of education. Here, the chance of students dropping out of school is very high.

Thus, most of the participants expressed that socioeconomic status of the family mainly affects school dropouts.

These findings correspond to the available literature regarding the influence of family socioeconomic status on education. The respondents claimed that children in low income or less educated families tend to lack parental support, have unstable family atmosphere, and family conflicts, which impact their academic performance and their risk of dropping out. These findings align with Shamila and Rajasingam (2017) and Forteset al. (2024), who note that economically and educationally disadvantaged families provide less guidance and resources, while Solangaarachchi (2021) highlights that parental issues create unstable environments that negatively affect students' education.

4.3. Parental Involvement

The lack of parental involvement is another issue in school dropouts in the selected area.

"Today's young students have no hope for the future, they have no purpose, they are pushed by their parents, so when the attention of the parents and the parents' attention towards the students decreases their education journey stops naturally" (a respondent).

"Many girls who get married at very young age have not lived with their mothers, either their mothers are abroad or work in Colombo. Under this situation mothers pay less attention or involvement with their children" (a respondent).

Inadequate parental involvement results in a reduced student concern with academic chores making them not interested in education. These comments stress parents who are not attentive or not involved in their children's schooling; students lose focus, leading to disruption of education. Moreover, lack of parental support primarily due to working parents' distance from home, or any other reason that deny parental involvement in the child can lead to her/his instability, ultimately causing dropouts.

It is evident that parents' involvement plays a vital role in the educational journey of students. Most of the participants opined that weak involvement by the parents often leaves students deviating from their studies due to the lack of proper guidance and attention from their parents. When parents fail to show involvement, students may lose interest in education and thus disengage or dropout eventually. In addition to that, the absence of better family conditions, in which parents become alienated because of their job or some other reason, could lead students to end their education.

Many participants stressed that less parental involvement is leading to school dropouts.

These findings confirm previous research on the critical role of parental involvement in students' education. The respondents reported that low parental attention leads to academic neglect and increases the risk of dropouts. This aligns with the findings of Park (2006) and Sandamali (2016), who noted that low parental involvement limits the support for students' learning and monitoring performances thus further increasing dropout tendencies.

4.4. Family Structure

Family structure also plays a significant role in affecting students' likelihood of dropping out of school.

“Due to parents going abroad, the family institution has broken down and as a result, many children have dropped out of school” (a respondent).

“There are children who come to school under the care of their grandparents because their mother or father has remarried. As they do not have proper encouragement from home, there is no one to look after their education, there is a high chance that many of these children will dropout of education. These grandparents are only on the idea that they will feed and take care of them, but they do not motivate children toward education” (a respondent).

Thus, changes in the family structure directly influence students' educational journey, leading to dropouts. Some participants confirmed that children who seem to have parents who spend less time with them often lose attention with their studies.

“There are some children who do household chores and look after their younger brothers and sisters. If these conditions continue, they will be at risk of losing their education” (a respondent).

Thus, family structure is an important factor affecting dropouts in school education. Some students' parents are absent due to work obligations in urban centers or overseas; children, especially in fragmented families caused by remarriages, are

devoid of emotional and educational support for school performance. Their grandparents may be there to provide basic needs such as food and shelter but they often lack the necessary motivation needed for academic pursuit. Such a deficiency in supervision and guidance creates an environment that fosters greater numbers of school avoidance and higher dropout rates among school students.

Moreover, children who also assume household chores; for instance, taking care of their younger siblings or managing the household tasks due to absence of the parents may find difficulty in balancing household responsibilities and education. The stress of performing these house chores may lead to poor school attendance, decreased academic performance, and ultimately dropping out of school. This lack of organization and support in the home setting disrupts the continuity of learning and easily causes students to become unfocused and unmotivated in their studies, ultimately leaving school prematurely.

The above findings align with existing literature; fragmented families or those living under grandparents often lack academic support or emotional support, with increased risk of school dropouts. Students from larger lower income families frequently must contribute household activities, limiting their educational opportunities (Perera, 2012).

5. Conclusion

This study identified the family-related factors affecting dropouts in school education with the perspectives from teachers in the Welimada division, Uva province, Sri Lanka. The key findings revealed that family components substantially impact educational journey by influencing student dropout behavior through factors such as socioeconomic status of the family, including family income, parental involvement, and family structure. Poor family finances push students to dropout of school when they are unable to pay their educational expenses and lower socioeconomic status restricts their access to educational materials and academic support systems. When parents do not participate in their children's education, students' motivation typically decreases leading to school dropouts. The emotional stability of children faces challenges when family structure is involved without parents, single parents or parental remarriage or family conflicts thereby reducing their ability to concentrate on academics. Addressing these family-related challenges is essential to reducing dropout rates.

These findings confirm previous research highlighting the major role of family-related factors in students' educational outcomes. Consistent with the existing literature, low family income, unstable family structure, low parental involvement

and poor socioeconomic status were found to increase the likelihood of school dropouts. This underscores the critical influence of family on students' behaviors.

The results of this study support both Ecological Systems Theory and Social Capital Theory. It implies various family issues, such as poor financial situation, non-stable family structures, and insufficient parent involvement have negative impacts on students' academic performance and increase the risk of dropping out from school.

5.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings offer theoretical and practical implications by providing suggestions to stakeholders to reduce the dropouts in school education.

Strengthening family support (Ecological Systems Theory) Promote active parenting, emotional support which help children stay motivated and improve family interactions. Establish family counselling programs (Ecological Systems Theory) to address family conflicts, and adjustments, thus helping to stabilize children's home environment.

Promoting extracurricular and social engagements activities (Social capital theory): Improve students' social networks, fostering positive relationships that support interest in education.

Increasing financial support for low income families: Dropout rates can be reduced by ensuring that more money is pumped into the households of the poor to help pay educational expenses and reduce the pressure of economic burdens on the students.

Increasing funding in education: Increase funding in education to ensure equal sharing of financial aid and educational resources.

Giving equal attention and resources for rural schools: The disparity can be shifted between rural and urban schools and have the same quality of education everywhere. This involves the creation of special programs catering to the needs of students from rural backgrounds.

Conducting parental Awareness Programs: Counseling, workshops would be held for the parents regarding the importance of their involvement in the child's education, which would help to pinpoint how a healthy family environment would help in the academic journey and general well-being of the child.

Forming community Support Networks. These networks directly cater to the community through guidance for families, especially those in low-income households. They provide supplies for school, nutritional services, tutoring, and some other things.

Creating a student follow-up system: Schools may have fundamental follow-up system in place where teachers follow-up with students who are frequently absent or exhibit abnormal behavior.

6. Limitations and Future Research

As this is a qualitative research with a smaller sample, the findings cannot be generalized to other areas of the country. Thus, quantitative study could be used in the future to validate the family-related factors affecting dropouts in school education. Another study could be undertaken to explore other factors affecting school dropouts in the same area.

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