Factors Associated with Non Schooling and Dropouts in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

In the countries of the world half the children enrolled in school fail to complete the primary level. Early leaving or dropout is defined as leaving school before the completion of a given stage of education or leaving at some intermediate or non terminal point in a cycle of schooling.[1] Non schooling children can be defined as those who have never been to school or never admitted to school. Dropouts problem is more serious than non schooling, and it is more complex. The magnitude of the problem varies from country to country and area to area, and remedial actions taken are not uniform.[2]

There has been a considerable increase in the level of literacy over the years in Sri Lanka [3] : 26% in 1901 and 87% in 1981; but there are still a remarkable number of non schoolings and dropouts. This study pays attention only to the rural sector of Sri Lanka because it constitutes about 80% of the national population; the district of Hambantota, which is predominantly agricultural, is selected for the investigation. There are two main objectives associated with the study. First, to examine the current trends and magnitude of dropouts and non schooling, and secondly, to investigate the socio-economic and demographic determinants of dropouts and non schooling in rural Sri Lanka.

Data and Methods

Possible determinants of non schooling and dropouts in rural Sri Lanka were examined by using data from the three samples in the Weeraketiya A.G.A. division of Hambantota district. They were selected on the basis of the main agrarian services with a view to representing the rural sector of the Hambantota district. In rural Hambantota about 60% of the population live in traditional agricultural sector, while about 20% each in irrigated cultivation sector and in chena cultivation sector. Allocation of sample to three strata was made according to the stratum population. A Total of 200 households were selected for the survey; thus the traditional sector received 120 households, while irrigated and chena sector 40 households each. Traditional sector sample was obtained from Kukagallara, Murumyaya and Okankayaya villages, and the irrigated sector sample from the the Wekandawala G.S. division. Required households from the chena sector were selected from Gonedeniya G.S. division.

The traditional agricultural sector can be defined as home gardens, in which people grow mixed crops; the cultivation can be done throughout the year. The main plantations in this sector are coconut and minor export crops such as pepper, coffee and cadju. Supporting economic activities like poultry and livestock breeding are also found in many households. The irrigated cultivation sector shows the predominant peasant character of the people. The unit of paddy cultivation is two acres which is sponsored by the government. Irrigated water is the main source for growing paddy but rain water is also well utilized. The third sector, chena cultivation, produces foodstuffs such as greengram, ginger, gingili, cowpea etc, largely depending on rainwater. Unlike in the past, now the farmers cannot change their cultivation land when it becomes less fertile because of the population expansion.

The 200 households interviewed had a total of 544 children of school going age of 6-18 years. For the collection of data on socio-economic and demographic variables, parents, non schoolers and early school leavers were interviewed at their homes. Ten school principals were also asked about their opinions and action regarding dropouts. Interviews were carried out in January 1992 and data were collected on non schooling and dropouts over the last 12 years.

For comparison purposes data on school dropouts from the 1981 population census were used along with the survey data. Even though from the school census of the Ministry of Education, the number of dropouts is also available up to 1992, the data are not very accurate: some districts report minus dropout rates and some report positive rates; therefore such dropout rates cannot be used for comparison purpose.

In addition to the percentage analysis used in the study, a Chi-Square test for independence between two variables was also used as the main statistical method to determine the significance of the associations. School dropouts and those who never attended school are the dependent variable and selected socio- economic variables are used as independent variables.

Results

School going age children aged 6-18 years in the study area can be divided into 2 categories: currently attending and currently not attending school. The non school attendance rate - the proportion of children in a given age group who are

not attending school at a given time - clearly shows a decline in the last decade (Table 1). In the present sample only 17% of children aged 6-18 were not attending school, while the corresponding figures in 1981 for the rural Hambantota and rural Sri Lanka were 24% respectively. In 1981 rural Hambantota had a lower non attendance rate because many other districts had a higher proportion of non attending children than Hambantota district.

Table I

Children of school going age (6-18) Years) by their school attendance in the three samples in 1991, rural sector of Hambantota district and rural Sri Lanka in 1981

Area	Year	Total		Attending		Non attending	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
Three Communities	1991	544	100	453	83.3	91	16.7
Rural Hambantota	1981	117565	100	89355	76.0	28210	24.0
Rural Sri Lanka	1981	3309884	100	2423928	73.2	885624	26.8

The declining trend in the non attendance rate can also be seen when a detailed breakdown of school going age is considered: the proportion of non attendance in the age group 6-8 in 1991 was 2% but in 1981 rural Hambantota it was 6% and in rural Sri Lanka the corresponding figure was 10% (Table 2). The whole non attendance rate in those aged 6-8 in the present study is accounted for by non schoolers. Even though in our sample there were hardly any dropouts in the age group 6-8, those who are currently not attending school among children aged 6-18 years can be classified into two groups: those who never attended school and those who dropout. Students who leave school before completing the full course of study at a specified level are counted as dropouts.

Table 2

Non attendance rates in the three communities
rural Hambantota and rural Sri Lanka by their current age

Age group 1991	Three communities 1981	Hambantota district (Rural)	Sri Lanka 1981 (Rural)
6-8	2.2	6.0	9.9
9-11	1.7	6.6	9.7
12-14	10.9	20.6	23.8
15-17	26.0	48.7	51.4
18	72.0	70.2	72.8

When an examination is made of the characteristics of the non attending children in rural Sri Lanka, sex is one of the important factors to be considered because in many developing countries the proportion of girls attending school is considerably lower than the proportion of boys.[4] In this study male-female differences in school attendance are not significant: in the sample, almost the same proportions, 84% of males and 82% of females of the school age population were attending school (Table 3). How ever, when those who have never been to school are considered it is clear that the proportion of girls, 3.6%, is considerably higher than that of males, 1.7 %.

Table 3

Percentage of children attending school by sex

sex	Total	%	Attending	%	Non-attending		Total	%
					Dropout	Non admitted		
Male	296	100.0	249	84.1	42	5(3.6%)	47	15.9
Female	248	100.0	204	82.1	35	9(1.7%)	44	17.9
Total	544	100.0	453	83.3	77	14	91	16.7

Table 4 illustrates the dropouts by the age at dropout; 17% at age 8-9 and 53% at age 10-13. Among the total dropouts of 77 in the sample only 13% left school at grades below 3. The peak level of dropouts can be seen at grades 5 or 6. The School Census of the Ministry of Education in 1982 reveals that grade 6 is one of the most unfavourable grades where a large number of children leave school. [5]

Table 4
Percentage distribution of dropouts by age at the dropout and by the class which they attended last

Age at the dropout	No of dropouts	%	Class/Year/ Grade at the dropout	No. of dropout	%
6-7	1	1.3	1-2	10	13.0
8-9	13	16.9	3-4	20	26.0
10-11	21	27.3	5-6	29	37.6
12-13	20	26.0	7-8	17	22.1
14-15	16	20.7	9	1	1.3
15-18	6	7.8			
Total	77	100.0	Total	77	100.0

The family composition or type of the family is another important demographic characteristic which can be related with the dropouts: whether there is a relationship between the type of family and the incidence of dropouts. We set the null hypotheses that there is no association between school attendance and the type of family. The observed Chi-square value of 0.03 is less than the critical value of 3.41 for 1 degree of freedom at the .05 level. Non attendance, therefore, is independent of the type of the family (Table 5). It is generally accepted that the joint family may have less possibility of non attendance than the nuclear family. The joint family has a grandmother or grandfather to look after small children, so school-age children do not have to stay home to mind their

small siblings. For this reason non nuclear families should have low dropout rates. Nevertheless the survey findings reveal that this is not the case. Joint families accounted for a slightly higher percentage of non attending children than nuclear families. Sometimes this may be due to an increase in the number of dependants in the extended families. Demographically nuclear families are more independent than the extended families and Sri Lanka has a tendency towards the nuclear type: at present it is estimated that about 85% of all families in the country are nuclear.

Table 5
School attendance by the type of the family

Type of Family	Attending	%	Non attening	%	Total	%
Nuclear	386	83.4	77	16.6	463	100.0
Joint	67	82.7	14	17.3	81	100.0
Total	453		91		544	

Is there a difference between the three samples on school attendance? The focus of the analysis is diverted to three samples: we set up the null hypotheses that there is no association between school attendance and the agrarian sector. The observed Chi-square value of 19.9 exeeds the critical value of 5.9 for 2 degrees of freedom at the .05 level. We reject the null hypotheses and conclude that school attendance among school-age children differs in selected samples (Table 6) The highest percentage of non attendance is contributed by the chena sector: out of the total number of school-aged children the rate of non attendance is 30%. This is because of the uneven distribution of school in this sector. On the other hand the chena sector has poorer economic conditions than the other two sectors.

Only 12% of the school going-age children in the traditional sector were reported to be not attending schools, thus compared with other two sectors, the traditional sector had the lowest non attendance rate; the irrigated sector with 17% non attendance was at an intermediate level. Inhabitants in all the three sectors were somewhat reluctant to expose their actual income. However, compared with the other two sectors the traditional sector has a more or less stable income. Relatively few unpaid family workers are found in the traditional sector compared with the other two sectors. It is usual for a large number of unpaid family workers including children of school-age to be engaged in both the irrigated and chena sectors during the sowing and cropping seasons.

Table 6

School attendance in the selected three sectors (samples) in the rural Hambantota

Sector	Total	%	Attending	%	Non Attending	%
Chena Sector	105	100	73	70.0	32	30.0
Traditional Sector	312	100	275	78.0	37	12.0
Irrigated Sector	127	100	105	83.0	22	17.0
Total	544		453		91	

Out of the total children of School-age in the full sample 14% were found to be dropouts while 2.6 % have never been to school. The causes for early leaving are many and varied. This holds good even for the small area under study within the area itself.

It was found that there are differences in the incidences of dropouts. In most instances a combination of causes may

be instrumental in causing a child to dropout of school. Possible determinants of dropout emerging from the study have been grouped into four categories for easy interpretation: (1) Socioeconomic; (2) physical or mental disability of children; (3) discouragement to study; (4) death of the elders (father, mother, elder brother or sister). Out of the four combinations poor socio-economic conditions and discouragement to study seem to be dominant, whereas other reasons are less important. However, for a few of the dropouts it was difficult to identify the real cause for early leaving. In some instances objective reasons such as illness may be used as an excuse for academic withdrawal.

Table 7 shows the strength of the aggregate contributing factors for the phenomenan of dropout. It may be that, the two dominant factors which determine the school dropouts, discouragement and socio-economic vulnerability, are related to each other through the most important single factors of family income. As shown in Table 7, 59 school leavers out of 77 (77%) belong to the monthly income group less than Rs. 500. Among the 77 dropouts, 33 (43%) left because of poor socio -economic conditions. Of those 33 students 30 belonged to families with less that Rs 500 per month. Therefore, income constraint can be strictly predicted as the most powerful factor for dropout of children from school. The correlation coefficient between family income and dropout is - .56

Table 7

Contributive factors of the dropouts

Contributive factors of school dropouts	No. of dropouts	%	Monthly household income	
			Less than or equal to Rs. 500/-	More than Rs. 500/-
Socio-economic condition	33	42.8	30	3
Physical & mental disability of child	5	6.5	5	-
Discouragement	3	44.2	22	12
Father's mother's brother's death	5	6.5	2	3
Total	77	100.00	59	18

As pointed out earlier the non attending children in the sample can be divided into two groups: those who have never been to school and those who dropout. Only 14 or 2.6% of the school-age children in the sample have never been to school; this was discussed in the previous analysis under the broad category of non attending children. The aggregate contributing factors for non schoolers are also discussed and presented in Table 8. Out of the 14 non schoolers three children had not been admitted to any school because of the poor socio- economic condition of the family. Though education is free, some money is required for schooling to provide facilities such as clothes, stationery and transport. Out of the non schoolers 57% are physically or mentally

retarded children. When non schoolers were cross classified by family income it was revealed that their families are in poor economic conditions and sometimes unaware of the need to admit their children to a special educational institution for receiving some sort of education. Of the children not admitted to school at all 21.4% were not admitted because of the negligence of the parents. There was not a single case of non admission due to the death of an elder.

Table 8
Contributive factors of the non schooling

Contributive factors of school dropouts	No.	%	Monthly household income	
			Less than or equal Rs. 500/-	More than Rs. 500/-
Socio-economic condition	3	21.4	3	-
Physical & mental disability of child	8	57.2	6	2
Negligence	3	21.4	3	-
Total	14	100.0	12	2

Conclusions and implications of the study

The factors related to school dropout are numerous. According to the findings of the study poor socio-economic conditions and parents' discouragement have the most powerful impact on the school dropouts. Mentally retarded and disabled children formed the highest percentages of non schoolers. Other studies have also revealed poor socio-

economic conditions as the major contributing factor for school dropouts in Sri-Lanka.[6,7] Low household income is found to be closely linked with the low socio-economic strata of the society and thereby with the high rate of dropouts in these families. Among all the 77 dropout children 77% belonged to households with less than Rs. 500 monthly income, while the corresponding percentage among those who have never been to school was 86%. Low household income could be related to the physical or mental disability of children from their conception. This is not only true for the dropouts but also for those who never attended school. Therefore improving the average income level of the rural Sri Lankan will naturally reduce the dropout and non schooling rates. For the eradication of the economic depression of the rural masses, it is essential to inaugurate the rural development programs accompanying the rural uplift that is needed for improving the quality of rural life.

There is a propensity to dropout when the children dislike the current curriculum. In rural areas the curriculum should be related to the real life situation. In addition to the knowledge of the school subjects, efforts should be made to enrich children's lives in general outside their school. For example it is best that activities like animal husbandry be started at year 3 in the primary school to enable the participants to obtain practical experience in manual labour. At the same time they should be encouraged to take a positive part in youth group activities and social service activities.

Some of the dropouts stated that deficiencies of the schools including persistent shortage of school buildings, equipment and other related facilities were reasons for the high rate of dropouts. To reduce the dropout rate the school system requires an increasing number of trained teachers: they should acquire the capabilities to impart knowledge to the school going population more effectively. Survey find-

ings revealed that parents' negligence and ignorance are causative factors for dropping out, non admission and late admission. A child of seven years had not been admitted to a school because his parents has not registered his birth. Therefore it is necessary to improve the level of people's awareness of the laws of the country and the value of education. As a last resort to reduce dropout rates in Sri Lanka. it may be necessary to enforce compulsory education and raise its level: the Education Ordinance of 1939 made provision for regulations to be enforced to ensure compulsory attendance. In the current situation there is no enforcement of compulsory education in Sri Lanka, but this may be necessary in the future in view of the large number of students dropping out from schools. But perhaps when the basic problems such as employment, income and easy access to schools are solved school wastage may be reduced considerably.

On the other hand to achieve universal school attendance it may be necessary to adopt a differentiated policy of financing and supporting the education of the most needy. Our study revealed that parents were now increasingly willing to send their children to school as text-book distribution relieved them of the major part of the financial burden they had to bear for the education of their children. The text-book distribution scheme contributed positively to the improvement of enrolment and attendance. Many principals of primary schools said that the mid-day meal programme plays an important part in increasing primary school attendance. But still many families cannot afford to send their children to school because of incidental expenses and loss of labour at home. However, out of the total school leavers 19% said that free text book distribution is not sufficient for poor

students to continue their studies. Their parents could not provide the clothes and writing material needed for schooling and therefore they were reluctant to attend school. Thus it is necessary to promote a special support and incentive mechanism for the economically and socially handicapped children in order to avhieve a low rate of school dropouts in the future Sri Lanka.

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