

THE EFFECTS OF THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS OF SRI LANKA IN THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES AMONG UPPER SENIOR SECONDARY GRADE STUDENTS: A STUDY BASED ON THE TAMIL-MEDIUM SCHOOLS IN THE COLOMBO EDUCATION ZONE

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka experienced a severe period of economic crisis from 2020. The current economic crisis in Sri Lanka has affected learning and school activities like other sectors. Main objective of the study is identify the impact of economic crisis in learning activities among upper senior secondary grade students. The study was conducted as a mixed method study using a descriptive quantitative research design with the aim of identifying the learning impacts on collegiate-level students studying in Tamil-medium schools in the Colombo Education Zone. 120 students were selected through stratified random sampling technique as sample of the study. Data were obtained from students (120), parents (40), teachers (30) and principals (06) using questionnaires and interviews. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results of this study show that a large number (72 %) of the students belong to families with income below the poverty line. 79.5% of the students' parents' employment and income have been affected by the economic crisis. 80.7% of the students are facing difficulties in obtaining shoes and school bags, 80.5% in obtaining textbooks, 70.81% in obtaining stationery, 81.58% in obtaining photocopies, 51.9% in obtaining smartphones, and 68.5% obtaining internet facilities are also facing difficulties due to this economic crisis. In addition, there is a correlation between economic status as a barrier to obtaining these and decreasing family income ($p < 0.01$). There is no statistical relationship between the distance between school and home and the means of transport used as a barrier ($p < 0.05$). There is an inverse correlation ($p < 0.01$) between distance from home to school and being late for school. Even in the economic crisis, most students (80.7%) participate in private classes.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, Economic Crisis, Upper Senior Secondary, Learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Colombo Education Zone in Sri Lanka is a zone that includes both suburban and rural schools. Suburban and rural areas are more resource-poor than urban areas. Since there are more suburban and rural areas in Sri Lanka than urban areas, the results of the study conducted in the Colombo Education Zone can be used to predict the results of the study for many other zones. Thus, this study examines how the current economic crisis is affecting the learning of Upper senior secondary grades (grade 12 and grade 13) students studying in Tamil-medium schools in the Colombo Education Zone. This study is considered a very important study as no studies have been conducted so far on how Upper senior secondary grades students are particularly affected by the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Sri Lanka was in the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis in 2020. According to the 2021 report of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka was already facing a crisis in 2020 due to the depletion of US dollar reserves, the depreciation of the Sri Lankan rupee against the dollar, difficulties in servicing foreign debts, the continuous increase in prices of goods and services, electricity shortages, and social and political unrest (News and Economic Research, 2022). This further escalated and reached a very bad state in 2022. The increase in prices increased from 44.3% in May 2022 to 59.9% in June 2022 according to the National Consumer Price Index. The increase in the price of food items increased from 58.5% in May 2022 to 76.8% in June 2022, according to the National Consumer Price Index, and the increase in the price of non-food items increased from 34.2% in May 2022 to 43.6% in June 2022, according to the National Consumer Price Index (NCPI). This led to a significant increase in the price of all items, including food items. In addition, the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka (PUC) had approved the proposal of the Ceylon Electricity Board to increase monthly electricity tariffs by an average of 75% with effect from 10 August 2022 (NCPI, 2022).

Sri Lanka's US dollar reserves had declined to 1.9 billion as of May 2022 (UNICEF, 2022). Imports of essential goods including petroleum products, pharmaceuticals, paper products, cooking gas, and food were difficult. This led to shortages of these goods. In general, all modes of transportation were severely affected. It is noteworthy that Sri Lanka closed schools for about a month from the end of June to 24th of August last year (2022) amid severe fuel shortages. According to the UNICEF report on the Sri Lankan budget for 2021, the share of education in GDP has been reduced to 2.3% (UNICEF, 2022). This is relatively low compared to other South Asian countries. Against this backdrop, Sri Lanka's economic crisis has also had a significant impact on students' education. According to the Director of the Sri Lankan World Bank's World Bank Programme, a recent needs assessment indicated that 50% of families are struggling to

continue their children's education and that some children are dropping out of school (World Bank 2022). Based on the World Bank's economic analysis of Sri Lanka in March 2022, the World Bank recommended that urgent policy measures be taken to address the high level of debt and debt service, reduce the fiscal deficit, and mitigate the adverse impacts on the poor and vulnerable (Rusasatana et al. 2022). The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has affected the learning of Upper senior secondary grades students. In particular, price increases have reduced the purchasing power of families with fixed incomes. Furthermore, the inability to cover the costs of education and the family economic situation of the students, transportation related to learning, and the inability to obtain learning inputs and equipment have affected the learning of college-level students.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To identify the effects of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka on the learning of Upper senior secondary grades students studying in Tamil-medium schools in the Colombo Education Zone.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify the effects of the current economic crisis on the family economic conditions of college-level students.
2. To identify the effects of the economic crisis on the learning environment in the homes of college-level students.
3. To identify the effects of the economic crisis on the school learning activities of college-level students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive quantitative study. It is a mixed method study using quantitative and qualitative data. Study population was college level students studying in schools (Tamil medium) in the Colombo Education Zone and the sample was 120 students selected through stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected from students (120), parents (40), teachers (30) and principals (06) using questionnaires and interviews and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the information was explained.

THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Family income and its impact on Learning.

Here 57.89% of the students' family income below Rs. 39999 and most of the students (at least 85%) are from families below the poverty line. It has also been found that most of the families (80.5%) are pushed into poverty due to economic hardship. Although free education is practiced in Sri Lanka, students have to pay for transportation, learning materials, internet access etc. at their own expense. This study found that

there is a direct correlation between the amount spent on a student's education and family income. ($r > 0.262$, $p < 0.01$). That is, when family income decreases, the amount spent on education decreases. Since most (at least 85%) of the students' families are below the poverty line, it has affected the amount spent on education. 53% of the students have indicated that they spend more than Rs. 5000 per month on their education. This is a heavy burden for the students' families in the current economic crisis. Pearson Chi – Square $X^2 = 34.860$ $df = 15$, $p = 0.003$ (< 0.01) Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) = 0.262 Approx. Significance 0.005 (< 0.01) This study found that there is a direct correlation between the amount spent on education by a student and family income. ($P > 0.262$, $p < 0.01$). That is, when family income decreases, the amount spent on education decreases. Since most (at least 85%) of the students' families are below the poverty line, it has affected the amount spent on education. 53% of the students have indicated that they spend more than Rs. 5000 per month on their education. In the current economic crisis, this is seen as a heavy burden on the students' families.

Table 3: Relationship between students' family income and participation in private classes

Monthly Family Income X Private Tuition Cross tabulation						
		Private Tuition				
		Yes	Cumulative Frequency of "Yes"	No	Total	Cumulative Frequency of Total
Monthly Family Income	<20000	20	20	8	28	28 (24.56%)
	20000 - 39999	33	53	5	38	66 (57.89%)
	40000 - 59999	27	80	5	32	98 (85.96%)
	60000 - 79999	10	90	0	10	108 (94.74%)
	80000 - 99999	0	0	2	2	110 (96.49%)
	100000 <	2	92	2	4	114 (100%)
Total		92		22	114	

(Source: Prepared by the researcher, 2023)

As per the above Table 3, it is observed that most of the students (80.7%) do not attend private classes, out of 98 students whose monthly family income is less than Rs. 60000 (up to Rest. 59999), 80 students (81.63% of 98) attend private classes, and out of 16 students whose monthly family income is Rs. 60000 or more, 12 students (75% of 16) attend private classes. The significance level between the monthly family income of the students and the amount spent on private classes is found to be $p > 0.089$ (0.05), so there is no significant difference at the 0.05 significance level. From this, there is no statistical relationship between monthly family income and the amount spent on private tuition. That is, those with low and high family incomes give equal importance to spending on private education.

A certain proportion (48.25%) of college-level students have to participate in increasing family income. In particular, 8.77% of students regularly contribute to increasing family income. This affects the learning of these students. Also, Kozhanadati (2011) stated that parental unemployment in Canada affects children's ability to continue higher education. In this study, it was found that 34.1% of parents have lost their jobs due to this economic crisis. 7.2 Identifying the Impact of Economic Crisis on the Learning Environment of College Students at Home. The study found that students are facing many impacts due to the economic crisis in Nigeria. The study found that 82% of parents and students stated that their purchasing power has decreased due to the economic crisis and are facing difficulties in acquiring books and educational materials (Deeyabaidhilaanae & Unanalanaaie 2016). In our study, 80.7% of parents and students are facing difficulties in acquiring shoes and school bags, 82.45% in acquiring textbooks, 72.81% in acquiring stationery, 81.58% in acquiring photocopies, 64.92% in acquiring smartphones, and 74.56% in acquiring internet facilities. It can be observed that the purchasing power of families has decreased due to the increase in prices and insufficient income.

Due to the current economic crisis, a significant number of students (42.1%) are facing difficulties in copying study guides, past question papers, course notes, etc. Past question papers, course notes and study guides are important for the education of high-level students. There is no practice in Sri Lanka of providing them free of charge in schools. A significant number of students are facing difficulties in obtaining them, which affects their learning environment. Furthermore, a small number of students (25.4%) do not face any impact due to reduced purchasing power. Others are facing various impacts due to reduced purchasing power such as inability to obtain school supplies for learning (32.46%), inability to obtain nutritious food (22.8%), inability to obtain necessary materials for learning on time (11.4%), inability to obtain necessary devices and internet facilities for online learning (9.65%). This is consistent with the study conducted in Nigeria mentioned above.

Table 4: Correlation between economic status barriers and declining household income

Economic status is a variable that can act as a barrier.	Spearman's correlation coefficient	(Significance)
Economic status is a barrier to access to school supplies such as shoes and textbooks, writing instruments, photocopies, smartphones, and electronic devices.	0.327	0.000(< 0.01)
Getting textbooks & materials	0.321	0.001(< 0.01)
Getting stationaries & instruments	0.314	0.001(< 0.01)
Photocopies & printing	0.363	0.000(< 0.01)
Use smart phones	0.280	0.003(< 0.01)
Electronic devices & Network	0.443	0.000(< 0.01)

(Source: Prepared by the researcher, 2023)

There is a positive correlation ($p < 0.01$) between economic status as a barrier to obtaining school supplies such as shoes, book bags, textbooks, stationery, photocopies, smartphones, and internet facilities and decreasing family income. That is, the vulnerability increases as family income decreases.

Electricity outages have affected the learning time of 78.95% of students and online learning of 83.33% of students. Furthermore, the increase in electricity prices has affected the learning time of most (69.3%) students. When there is a power outage at home, students use electric light (35.96%), energy-saving lamp (23.68%), candle (16.67%), kerosene lamp (14.04%), and telephone light (11.4%), while 29.82% of students wait for electricity to come on. Due to the economic crisis, students who are engaged in part-time jobs are not interested in studying due to physical fatigue (14.91%), cannot complete housework (10.53%), and assignments on time (9.65%), and only 4.39% of students have no impact on their learning. These affect the self-learning time of those students

Identifying the effects of economic crisis on school learning activities of college-level students.

The study by Ranaiva and Uyyanesayan (n.d) concluded that distance to school plays an important role when poor families consider sending their children to school. Here, it is observed that most (40.35%) students come to school from a distance of less than 2 km and only 12.3% of students come to school from a distance of 8 km or more. Most of the students use public transport (43.86%) and walk (41.23%). Some students also use motorcycles, tricycles, bicycles, cars, etc. It is observed that no student comes to school by

air. Transportation was not a barrier to school attendance for most students (59.65%). There was no statistical relationship between the distance between school and home and the means of transportation used as a barrier ($\chi^2 = 9.288$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.05$). This is due to the fact that more students walk. There is an inverse correlation between the distance from school to home and the incidence of being late to school Spearman correlation ($r = 0.452$, $P = 0.01$). Therefore, the incidence of being late to school decreases when the school is closer to home. However, most students (55.26%) are late to school due to transportation and this economic problem. 25.44% of students spend more than Rs. 5000 on transportation for learning. Principals of the schools in question (40%) are facing difficulties due to the high cost of transportation for students from remote areas. Therefore, the increase in transportation costs due to the economic crisis has significantly affected the participation of students in school learning activities.

Table 5: Student participation rate in online learning

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very Good	2	5.9	5.9
Good	15	44.1	50.0
Bad	12	35.3	85.3
Very Bad	5	14.7	100.0
Total	34	100.0	

(Source: Prepared by the researcher, 2023)

As per Table 5, the student participation rate was good only during the online learning and teaching activities of 50% of the teachers. However, during the period when the school was closed due to the economic crisis, the school learning and teaching activities were conducted online. From this, it has been found that the online learning activities of the schools have not reached all the students.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to identify the various impacts of the current economic crisis on the family economic conditions of college-level students, the learning environment at home, and school learning activities and the related factors. This economic crisis has caused various impacts on the learning of most students. Family income is a major factor in this. Students give importance to private education even during the economic crisis in Sri Lanka's higher education. The government should take measures at various levels to address the impacts on learning. Helping parents and families increase their income can help reduce the impact on learning. Encouraging students to study in schools close to home can help reduce the impact of

transportation during economic crises. Providing temporary assistance to students by government or non-governmental organizations to purchase learning materials, study guides, past question papers, course notes and school supplies can be a temporary relief.

According to the student statements the student participation rate was good only during the online learning and teaching activities of 50% of the teachers. However, during the period when the school was closed due to the economic crisis, the school learning and teaching activities were conducted online. From this, it has been found that the online learning activities of the schools have not reached all the students.

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