

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dropping out of school at secondary level: an exploratory study

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Abstract: Though primary and secondary dropout rates are low in Sri Lanka, given the government delivered free education and schooling expenditure related subsidies accessible to all children, even some children being out of school, is a concern. Further, Sri Lanka is a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals commitment to achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all by year 2030. Literature indicates that poverty and failures in education performance, to be the dominant factors affecting leaving education. However, the nexus between abandoning education and early marriage or cohabitation is also an issue less discussed in the local literature. This study attempts to understand this nexus and its implications for policy and interventions for prevention of permanent discontinuation of schooling. The study adopted a mixed methods research approach, and is based on data collected in the Dimbulagala Education Zone in Polonnaruwa District of Sri Lanka. The study found poverty to be the leading factor causing children to leave school, but mismanagement of relationships with the opposite sex due to their poor life skills, rejection and humiliation of such relationships by school, society and family, severe breakdown in family, school and social support structures, were also found to be factors contributing to the problem. Findings indicate the need for life skills education and the need for engagement of school, family and community in supporting children's education.

Keywords: Secondary school dropouts, early marriage; life skills education.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the global commitment to achieve universal primary and secondary school completion, still many children leave school without completing secondary

or even primary education. According to UNESCO statistics (UNESCO, 2019), in South Asia, 6.8% of primary level children, 15.2% lower secondary level and 45.5% upper secondary level children are not in school, indicating the severity of the challenge of meeting the commitment to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4: achieving inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). In Sri Lanka, 1.9% of the primary school-aged children and 3.3 % of the lower secondary school-aged children had dropped out of school, and 73.7% and 99.6% of dropouts in the primary age group and the lower secondary age group, respectively, have no expectation of returning back to school (UNICEF, 2013). Child activity survey of 2016 (Sri Lanka, Department of Census & Statistics (DCS), 2017) shows that 2% of the children in the 5-14 year age group, and 39.7% in the 15-17 year age group were not attending school. Although primary and secondary dropout rates are low in Sri Lanka compared with other South Asian countries, given that the state delivers free education which is accessible to all children and given that schooling expenditures are largely subsidized by the state, children being out of school, is a serious concern. Further, Sri Lanka is a signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 and is committed to achieve primary and secondary school completion for all children by 2030.

Education is the basis of human capital of a country and the foundation for social development and economic growth, and children abandoning schooling negatively impacts both the individual and the society;

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a lesser number of years of formal schooling limits an individual's income earning and consumption possibilities (Welch, 1974), and increase the risk of social and emotional problems leading to high risk of social exclusion and related issues (Brunello & De Paola, 2014; Fernandez-Suarez *et al.*, 2016, Word Bank, 2018). Therefore, the reasons for abandoning schooling unless understood and managed, will result in serious costs to the society.

Literature indicates that poverty, conditions caused by poverty, and failures in education delivery, to be the dominant factors effecting discontinuation of schooling. However, the nexus between abandoning education and early marriage or cohabitation is an issue less discussed in the local literature. This study attempts to understand this nexus and its implications for policy and interventions for prevention of permanent discontinuation of schooling.

Literature review

Literature (e.g.: Arunatilake, 2005; Gunawardane & Jayaweera, 2004; Sri Lanka Ministry of Education *et al.*, 2009; UNICEF, 2013; Rumberger, 1983) argues that poverty is the leading cause for children to discontinue education. These studies expound that income poverty is the root cause resulting in the inability to bear the private costs of education, need for the children to be employed to support family earnings, poor health, malnutrition affecting performance at school and many other causes discussed here. Harachi *et al.* (1996) and Maguin (1996) identify poor progress in school as a leading cause for children to dropout out of school. Children who get continuously low grades in school have a strong tendency to discontinue schooling. Gunawardane & Jayaweera (2004), Garnier *et al.* (1997) and Rumberger (1983; 1987) show that parents' level of education and employment, parents' and children's lack of awareness of private or social returns to education as well as the intrinsic value of education resulting in parents' disengagement with the child's education, lead to discontinuation of schooling. These authors further argue that family values and behaviours, especially children's early exposure to drug use, involvement in criminal activities, promiscuous behavior of family members, sexual relationships and early marriage are factors that affect dropping out of school. Further, Battin-Pearson *et al.* (2000) noted that there is a higher tendency of children from fractured families to dropout, compared with families with a greater level of bonding. Hallinan & Williams (1990), while noting the huge influence of families on the children's behavior, stress the impact of behavior of peers on schooling decisions. Rumberger (1983) also notes the effect of geographic location, and

Battin-Pearson *et al.* (2000) note the role of ethnicity, indicating that minorities tend to drop out of school more often.

On the aspect of education delivery, Arunatilake (2005; 2009), UNICEF (2013) and Tinto (1975) note that poor quality of teaching in school, lack of teachers, poor teacher-student relationship, poor classroom processes, lack of basic school facilities, the overall poor performance of schools and access to schools are factors found to be effecting the decision to discontinue schooling. Tinto (1975) further notes that depending on the job market prospects, especially boys, appear to invest their time and energy to earn an income rather than to spend time in school.

Other than these most frequently discussed factors effecting abandoning education, where much of the education access barriers are consequences of low incomes or poverty, the effect of early marriage or cohabitation as a reason for abandoning schooling is sparsely discussed in the local research literature. In Sri Lanka, the legal age for marriage is 18 years, except for the Muslim community (Goonesekere & Amarasuriya, 2013). Therefore, in any non-Muslim community, an underage girl or boy living together with a partner of the opposite sex is considered as 'cohabitation' rather than 'marriage'. Global literature (e.g.: UNICEF, 2019; McClear-Sills *et al.*, 2015; World Bank, 2017) analysing girls' education attainment and early marriage data notes that despite recent progress in girls' education, child marriages and pregnancies remain barriers to continuation of schooling. Birchall (2018), analysing the relationship between early marriages, pregnancies and school dropouts, notes that early marriages and pregnancies can be both the cause and consequence of dropping out from school. In Sri Lanka, there is only limited research literature (e.g. Goonesekera & Amarasuriya, 2013; Centre for Equality and Justice, 2018) discussing the link between early marriages and school dropouts. Therefore the issue deserves closer analysis and understanding, particularly in view of prevention through policy and intervention. Additionally, in Sri Lanka, most of the school dropout literature focus has been on primary or lower secondary dropouts, indicating an overall paucity of information on upper secondary dropouts.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY APPROACH

Research questions

Given the above context, this study attempts to understand the nexus between secondary school dropouts and early marriage or cohabitation, and to understand implications

for policy and programmatic interventions for prevention of permanent discontinuation of schooling. Thus, the study attempts to address two specific research questions: (1) what are the social and economic factors that are likely to be contributing to secondary school dropouts and in particular, the nature of the nexus between marriage/cohabitation and dropouts, and (2) given this nexus, what type of policy and programmatic interventions might help prevent permanent discontinuation of schooling of secondary school children.

Definition of dropouts

School dropouts have been defined variously in the literature. UNESCO (2019) defines a school dropout as 'a student who leaves school definitively in a given school year'. UNICEF & UIS (2016) refers to dropping out of school as 'the process of a student abandoning his or her studies before completion of a cycle of education, whether compulsory or not'. Bonnaeu (2015) discussing drop out definitions in United States, defines a school dropout as 'any student who leaves school for any reason before graduation or completion of a program of studies without transferring to another elementary or secondary school'. In India, for the purpose of statistical data collection, a dropout is considered as a student who leaves school before the completion of a school stage or leaving at some intermediate or non-terminal point of a given level of school education (NCERT, 2005). These definitions imply that school dropouts are the specific segment of children who should be continuing education in school, but who have left school midway and are not continuing the required formal school education cycle elsewhere.

In this study secondary school dropouts are defined as the specific segment of children who have left school without completing secondary school and are not continuing or expecting to continue formal or informal secondary school education elsewhere. Because the focus is on social and economic factors resulting in school dropouts, all temporary dropouts, i.e. those who are awaiting General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE OL) results and who are studying at home for General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE AL) and who are not in school due to disability or chronic illness, have been left out from the study.

Theoretical framework

The following theoretical framework, developed by Danovska (2018) and Battin-Pearson *et al.* (2000), which consists of six components in line with the findings in the literature, was used as the basis for designing the

quantitative and qualitative data collection methods and the instruments of this study.

Academic mediation theory

This theory states poor academic progress at school to be a strong factor affecting dropping out of school. Children who continuously get low marks at classroom assessments and at examinations tend to drop out of school, because of the inferiority or hopelessness they encounter or low confidence to succeed, due to poor academic progress. Children also dropout of school because they fail examinations disqualifying them to continue schooling.

Institutional departure theory

The theory postulates that the poor quality of education at school, negative attitudes of the teachers and the academic community, inferior schooling experiences as well as issues to access schooling, affect schooling and discontinuation decisions of the child or the parents.

Poor family socializing theory

The theory posits that low educational and employment status of the parents and family members, stresses and needs arising from poverty, health issues of family members, family size, separation of parents or separation from the family, affect school discontinuation decisions of the child.

General deviance theory

According to this theory the life style of the family and its attitudes and behavior towards education are strong factors influencing dropouts. It is noted that early exposure to use of narcotics, gang culture, promiscuous life style of family members, exposure to sexual abuse, adolescent pregnancies are strong factors effecting dropping out of school.

Deviant affiliation theory

The theory states that influence of affiliates, especially peers, adolescent's tendency to be identified with promiscuous peer cultures, pull children to dropping out of school.

Structured strain theory

The theory states that elements of social structures such as gender, ethnicity, religion, geographic locations, especially minority structures, cause children to dropout.

Research method

With the aim of answering the research questions more comprehensively, a mixed methods research approach of combining quantitative and qualitative research components, is used. The study was carried out in two phases: the first phase was to identify children who dropped out of school and the second phase, was to identify contexts and reasons associated with leaving school. The first phase data collection was from the school's official records. The dropout rates and the gender disaggregated shares of dropouts are based on the data collected from the school records. In the second phase, data was collected using a semi structured questionnaire, through interviewing a purposive sample of girls and boys who had dropped out, to collect data on factors associated with permanent discontinuation of schooling.

Study area and sample

In Sri Lanka, school dropouts are more concentrated in some economic pockets such as in the undeveloped rural areas, in the plantation sector, in coastal areas, war affected areas and in urban areas with potential for non-formal low-skilled employment (Perera, 2012). Given that, among the factors that affect continuation of schooling, the authors wanted to understand the association between early marriage and school dropout in particular, and based the study in Dimbulagala Education Zone in the Polonnaruwa District which is a rural area in close proximity to war affected Eastern Province, and where anecdotal evidence suggests high incidence of early marriages and school dropouts. Further the International Non-Government Organisation, Room to Read Sri Lanka, which supported this study was having a Girls Education Program Implementation in Dimbulagala Education Zone, and hence enabled access to school dropout data.

Data collection

Data collection was done in 10 schools in Dimbulagala Education Zone in Polonnaruwa District of Sri Lanka. These 10 schools were where Room to Read Sri Lanka began implementing the Girls Education Program in 2018, and hence the data collectors were allowed access to school's official records. In these 10 schools, the names of children who dropped out of the school while they were studying in Grades 6-13, during 2015-2017, were obtained from the school 'register records'. Also for the purpose of comparison, the authors focused on both boys and girls. Next, for each child who left school the reason for leaving school and the child's contactable address was extracted from the 'school admission and

school leaving record book'. It was found that for many children the contactable locations were unavailable; location addresses were available only for two thirds of all dropouts.

From among the children for whom the location address was available, purposive selection of the sample of children for the second phase data collection interviews was done as a follow-up. This sampling procedure was adopted separately for boys and girls. In Sri Lanka, schooling is compulsory for all children aged 6-14 years and the obligation of parents to send children to school is legally enforceable, and hence there is the tendency that children or parents/guardians of these 6-14 year old dropped-out children refraining from allowing children to respond to the interviews. Therefore, all Grade 6-10 children, for whom the location addresses were available, were included in the sample. Given that children dropping out from Grade 12 and 13, and children leaving school at Grade 11 are comparatively low, all Grade 11, 12 and 13 children with location addresses were included in the sample. Given that the majority leave school due to failing the GCE OL examination, from among those children for whom location addresses were available, one child from each year in each school was randomly selected into the sample. The second phase data collection was done in 2018 by external enumerators who were trained to collect data using a semi-structured questionnaire designed to collect data on the context and reasons for abandoning schooling. The data collectors visited every child in the sample and obtained data through individual interviews. For a majority of the cases the dropped-out child was interviewed, but in a few cases where the child was living away from the given location, a close relative (e.g.: a parent, sibling) was interviewed to obtain information about the child.

Limitations

The major limitation of the study was that despite adolescence marriage/cohabitation being a major focus of the study, no direct question had been included in the qualitative data collection instrument on adolescence pregnancy. Directly questioning on pregnancy was avoided considering the sensitivity of such a question and any possible negative impact it may have on the respondent. However, it was noted that despite pregnancy not being questioned, participants disclosed such information during the qualitative data collection interviews.

Categorisation of children as poor and non-poor was done based on the data collector's observations of the dwelling characteristics, family members characteristics (e.g.: health, employment), resource access and observable

wealth characteristics. It is well documented in poverty identification literature (e.g.: Atkinson & Micklewright, 1983; United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2011) that collection of income data for a more objective categorisation of poor and non-poor would require a large set of quantitative data related to household income and expenditure, and hence beyond the scope of this study.

Ethics

Informed consent of the participants was obtained, explaining the purpose of the research and how the results will be used. When data analysis was done, data was not associated to any names or other information connected to the participants’ identity. The data collectors were trained to take the utmost effort to protect the privacy and respect the participants.

FINDINGS

Dropout rates

This analysis is based on the data collected from school records, in the first phase. Dropout rate at a grade level for a given year is defined as the percentage share of children who have left school within the year while in the particular grade, to, the total number children who entered that grade in the same year. Data shows that dropout rates vary across grades and by gender. For Grades 6-9, which coincide with the compulsory schooling age group, for boys the dropout rates were between 1.4 % to 2.8%, and for girls between 0.7% to 1.8% (see Table 1 & Figure 1). After passing the compulsory schooling age, for boys there is a rise in dropout rates at Grade 10 (4.8%) but for girls it remains at 1.6%. A large share of children had

Table 1: Dropout rates based on school records

Grade	2015		2016		2017		Average over 2015-2017	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
6	2.0%	0.4%	1.0%	0.9%	1.5%	1.0%	1.5%	0.7%
7	1.6%	1.3%	2.0%	1.4%	0.5%	0.9%	1.4%	1.2%
8	4.8%	2.0%	1.5%	0.3%	2.4%	1.1%	2.8%	1.1%
9	4.2%	2.1%	2.4%	2.7%	0.4%	0.7%	2.4%	1.8%
10	2.1%	1.0%	5.6%	1.4%	4.4%	2.4%	4.1%	1.6%
11	48.1%	41.5%	56.3%	31.2%	35.3%	21.6%	46.7%	30.3%
12	9.6%	9.1%	5.6%	8.2%	1.0%	4.0%	5.4%	6.8%
13	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%	0.4%	0.8%

Note: Calculation of dropout rates with actual numbers are given in Appendix 1.

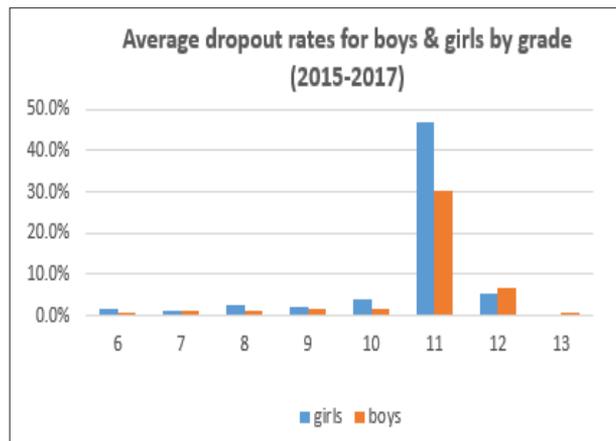


Figure 1: Average dropout rates for boys and girls by grade (2015-2017)

dropped-out at grade 11 either not sitting for the GCE OL exam or failing the exam. For boys it was 46.7% and for girls 33.3%. It was also seen that dropout rates are higher for boys up to grade 11, but for Grades 12 and 13 dropout rates are higher for girls, indicating that up to GCE O.L. more boys dropout of school but once they pass OL and start continuing education they stay on to sit for GCE AL exams, but even if girls start studying for GCE AL, chances are higher that girls might dropout.

In Dimbulagala Zone, secondary school dropout rates across grades (based on the data) are unlikely to be worse than those at the national level or those of Polonnaruwa District. According to the Millenium Development Goals Country Report -2014 (UNDP, 2015), based on Department of Census & Statistics Household Income & Expenditure Survey (2014) data, for the age group

11-14, which coincides with Grades 6-9, children who are not in school are 3.9% in Polonnaruwa and 1.7% at National level. For the Dimbulagala Zone, based on the collected data this is 1.6%.

According to the same UNDP report, for the age group 15-16, which coincides with grades 10-11, children who are not in school are 19.8% in Polonnaruwa and 13.9% at National level; but for Dimbulagala Zone, this was only 10.3%. For the age group 17-18, which coincides with those who have sat for GCE OL examination, 61.5% of the children in Polonnaruwa District and 40.2% of the children at national level are not in school. In Dimbulagala Zone this is about 38.3%.

Similar to the gender parity (calculated as the ratio of female-to-male values for a given outcome indicator)

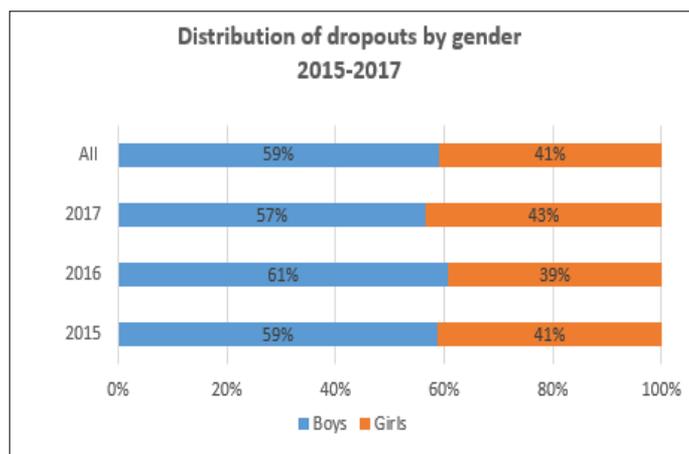


Figure 2: Distribution of dropouts by gender (2015-2017)

in most educational outcomes in Sri Lanka (UNESCO, 2012), the gender parity based on the data for secondary school (Grade 6-13) dropouts too is in favor of women. For secondary school dropouts, the gender parity stand at 0.7 over the three years 2015-2017, showing that the share of women among dropouts are less than that of men. On an average, the share of female dropouts is 41%, while it is 59% for males (Figure 2). Across gender, the dropout rates, as well as shares, are higher for boys compared to girls.

Factors associated with girls leaving secondary school

This analysis is based on qualitative data that was collected during the second phase of data collection using a semi-structured questionnaire. In reporting of qualitative data, quasi statistics were used i.e. simple

counts of events to make statements such as “some”, “usually”, and “most” more precise. As noted by Sandelowski *et al.* (2009), this quantizing of qualitative data is done to allow analysis to discern and to identify nuances indicated by the data, which might not otherwise be seen.

Schooling is compulsory for all children of 6-14 years, and not sending children to school is an actionable offence committed by the parent or guardian responsible for the child. Therefore, many parents/guardians of children who dropped while in lower grades (Grades 6-9) refused to be interviewed. Also it was not possible to locate some children who, after leaving school, had moved away from their recorded locations. Therefore, it was not possible to interview the girls in the sample in Grades 6 and 7, and only one Grade 8 dropout girl

responded; she had left school due to a physical disability and she was continuing vocational education in a school for children with disabilities.

Out of the seven Grade 9 dropped-out girls in the sample, only two girls responded. Low response rate were due to the same reasons noted above. One girl was from a low income family with a physically disabled father and a casual laborer mother; the girl being unable to meet schooling expenditure from the family’s meager income had left school on her own volition. The other girl who was from a single-mother family, had been sexually abused at age 14 while in a relationship, and left school being unable stand the humiliation of and rejection by peers, teachers and the community. The child is not cohabiting with a man, but living with parents and at the time of the survey, working in a garment factory.

Among the Grade 10 dropouts, 9 out of the 11 in the sample responded. Every one of these 9 girls had been in an intimate relationship with a man, and, 4 of these girls, despite wanting to continue education, had left school because they were unable to tolerate the humiliation of and rejection by peers and the school community, for having a relationship with a man. For eight of these 9

cases there is no evidence that the parents encouraged them to leave school to live with a man. In two cases the family had categorically threatened the girls to stop the relationship. The only case where the father did not oppose was a girl from a family abandoned by the mother. In most of the cases it was the opposition of the parents or the humiliation of and rejection by school community that drove the child away from school to live with a man. A girl who did well in school but who dropped out and cohabited with a man said,

“ Even though I had this relationship I did not neglect my studies. I wanted to study well find a job and get married. But from the day my family and school came to know about my relationship they harassed me. Many of my teachers ridiculed me saying that I am a bad girl and told other girls not to associate with me. Being unable to face this situation I left school and went to live with my lover”

The data did not show evidence of parent’s approval of early marriage or a custom of cohabitation or marriage at a young age. Summary of factors associated with the

Table 2: Summary of responses from Grade 10 dropped out girls

Household’s financial situation	Family issues	Had intimate relationship with man	Humiliated and rejected by school community compelling the child to leave school	Family opposed relationship or no evidence of family support for relationship	Left school to live with a man
With Financial difficulties	6	6	4	6	6
No evidence of financial difficulties	3	3	-	2	3

girls leaving school are given in Table 2. In the following tables, family issues are taken to be situations where one or both parents have abandoned the family or, having a sick or disabled parent unable to earn an income or support the child, or a parent being legally convicted for an offence. Further, in all tables the columns are mutually inclusive, which means that for a given child, there can be more than one factor associated with the child abandoning schooling and hence the child may be present in more than one column, and therefore, no row totals are shown. Many of the respondents were not able to state the family income; but stated that they had financial difficulties constraining schooling.

From the Grade 11 dropped out girls, out of the 36 in the sample, 31 responded. Twenty two (22) girls left school failing GCE O.L. examination, mostly after the first attempt, 07 children left school without sitting for GCE O.L. exam and 02 children left school after passing GCE O.L. exam (Table 3). Data shows that financial difficulties, inability to bear financial expenditure associated with sitting for the exam (e.g.: expenditure to obtain extra tuition, expenditure to travel to school etc.), being doubtful about passing exam due to poor progress in class, need to be employed to support family and themselves, or wanting to get married or cohabit, were the main reasons they left school education. Grade 11

Table 3: Summary of responses from Grade 11 dropped out girls

Household financial situation	Stage of leaving school	Left school due to Financial difficulties	Wanting to be employed	Wanting to get married / cohabit	No evidence of parents' consent for early marriage	Parent consented to marriage or Family arranged marriage	Family issues
With financial difficulties (15)	Failing OL (10)	4	6	4	3	1	5
	Before sitting OL (4)	1	3	2	2	-	4
	Passed OL (1)	-	-	1	1	-	-
No evidence of financial difficulties (16)	Failing OL (12)	-	6	6	4	3	2
	Before sitting OL (3)	-	2	2	1	1	1
	Passed OL (1)	-	-	1	1	-	-

dropouts are those above the compulsory schooling age and with no restrictions of being employed. Therefore, 17 girls chose to leave education to be employed either because they wanted to earn money or had no hope of passing the exam or not wanting to continue education any further. Five (05) girls stated that they left school because they couldn't afford to continue studies, and 06 chose employment with no hope of passing the GCE O.L. exam or because they did not want to continue studies. Seventeen (17) girls (i.e. more than a half) left wanting marry or cohabit, but for 12 cases there was no evidence of parents' consent. The two girls who left school after passing GCE O.L. examination did so because they wanted to get married or cohabit and both did so without the consent of their parents. Only 05 out of the 17 girls' marriages were arranged by parents or received consent of parents.

Out of the 09 Grade 12 and 13 girls selected for the sample, only 05 responded. All five girls had left school in Grade 12/13, i.e. after having passed GCE O.L. and while studying for the A.L. exam, and had done so to live with a man with whom they have had a relationship. In all five cases parents opposed marriage and in one case the father had died due to grief. For upper secondary girls, leaving education to get married or wanting to live with a man is clearly visible, but the data does not

show any evidence that early marriages are supported by parents and hence the data does not show evidence for 'prevalence of a custom of early marriages'. If early marriages were customary, then there could be no opposition from parents. Rather than the prevalence of a custom, for these upper secondary girls, their desire to marry or cohabit with a man, appears to be a status quo.

Factors associated with boys leaving secondary school

From Grades 6 and 7 only 02 male children responded. One child was from a poor and broken family without the mother and a mentally unstable father and the inability to meet financial expenditure for schooling made the child abandon education despite the child's expressed desire to go to school, demonstrating a typical case of dropping out of school due to poverty. The other child was also from a low income family, with very poor progress in school, unable to read and write properly even at Grade 7. This child had left school and at the time of data collection was working as a casual laborer and living with a 16 year old girl.

Six (06) boys who left school in Grade 8 responded. Five of them were from families where either the mother had deserted the family, or the father has deserted the family or the mother was in a chaotic marriage or the

Table 4: Summary of responses from Grades 8 & 9 &10 dropped out boys

Grade at which boy left school	Household’s financial situation	Family issues	Wanted to be employed to support family	Preferred to be employed	Poor progress in class
Grade 8	With Financial difficulties (4)	4	3	-	2
(6)	No evidence of financial difficulties (2)	2	2	1	1
Grade 9	With Financial difficulties (2)	2	2	-	1
(4)	No evidence of financial difficulties(2)	2	-	-	-
Grade 10	With Financial difficulties (2)	2	2	-	-
(3)	No evidence of financial difficulties(1)	1	2	1	-

mother was sick; four were from families with financial difficulties. One child left school being unable to read or write properly even at Grade 8. Five of the children were working as casual laborers and one appeared to be idling

at home. Out of the 04 Grade 9 children who responded, two were from the same family with the mother dead and the father sick with no income and the children had left school to earn an income to support the father. Only 03

Table 5: Summary of responses from Grade 11 dropped out boys

Household’s financial situation	At what stage boy left school	Wanting to be employed	Wanting to take up skills development training	Family issues	To take care of family member	Learning issues
With Financial difficulties (14)	Failing OL (9)	8	1	4	-	-
	Before sitting OL (5)	3	1	4	2	-
	Passed OL (0)	-	-	-	-	-
No evidence of financial difficulties (26)	Failing OL (17)	17	5	2	-	-
	Before sitting OL (4)	4	-	1	-	2
	Passed OL (5)	5	-	-	-	-

Grade 10 children responded. Two of them were from poor and broken families and left school wanting to do a job. The third was a mentally retarded child from a non-poor family. These responses are summarised in Table 4.

In Grade 11, 40 boys selected to the sample responded. Out of these 40, nine boys had never sat for the GCE O.L. exam, 27 boys had failed the exam

and four had dropped out after passing the exam. The children who left home without sitting for the exam did so due to different reasons, but the common factor was poverty and financial constraints making them dropout from school and work to support family (Table 5).

Wanting to be employed either due to inability to meet education related expenditure or due to having no hope of passing exam or not wanting to study further but

preferring to be employed, turned out to be a main reason for boys to abandon education. Fourteen (14) boys came from low income families and 26 were from better off families. Nine (09) boys from poor families left school failing GCE O.L., 05 before sitting for GCE O.L. ; none after passing. Seventeen (17) from better off families left school failing GCE O.L., 04 before sitting and 05 after passing. Out of the 40 boys who responded, 37 had left school either due to inability to meet education related expenditure or due to no hope of passing exam or not wanting to study further but preferring to be employed. A boy from a low income family who left school after passing GCE O.L. said,

“My family cannot spend money for tuition classes and if I don’t take tuition I will not be able to pass the A level exam. I thought better leave school now and find employment“.

A boy from a better off family who left school after passing GCE O.L. said,

“Even if I pass A level exam I may not get marks high enough to go to the university. So why spend another two years in school. I left school to find a job or do a small business” .

These statements clearly reflect why boys dropout from school even after passing GCE O.L. exam. Twenty two (22) of them had found employment, while a few were waiting to be employed. From among the poor who failed GCE O.L. exam, 08 wanted to be employed and from among the non poor who failed , 18 wanted to be employed. From among the poor who never sat for GCE O.L. exam, 03 wanted to be employed and from among the non-poor, 04 wanted to be employed. From among non-poor who passed, 05 wanted to be employed, which shows that irrespective of being poor or better off, most of the boys had left school wanting to be employed. From among the 40 boys who responded, 11 were from broken families, where either both or one of the parents had abandoned the family affecting the child’s schooling through absence of guidance or a family issue affecting either the financial strength of the family or the child’s schooling.

DISCUSSION

The data shows that, while most of the boys who dropped out of school did so to find employment and earn money, most of the girls dropped out of school to due to a reason connected to a relationship with the opposite sex. Given that forming relationships with the opposite sex during

adolescence is a common phenomenon, the data shows that girls not being able to manage such relationships, and the rejection of the relationship by the school, family and community turned out to be a critical reason which has driven these girls to abandon schooling, and very often to cohabit with a man. Being unable to manage their relationships and being unable to cope up with the humiliation and rejection by the peers, school, community and family, and taking a decision to cohabit with a man at an age at which legal marriage is not allowed, clearly indicate the absence of life skills among these girls. The secondary school level which coincides with adolescence is the phase in life where children develop physical and emotional behavioral skills which will impact the rest of their lives. This is the time where they form relationships and hence a critical point which can lead to positive or negative life outcomes. Decisions during this life phase can influence their well-being throughout their lifetimes, affecting not only the individual, but also their families, community and society .

UNICEF (2003) defines Life Skills as ‘psycho-social abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life’, and are grouped into three broad categories: cognitive skills for analysing and using information, personal skills for developing personal agency and managing oneself, and inter-personal skills for communicating and interacting effectively with others. Life skills help people to make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner, and the absence of life skills will place people at disadvantage in every sphere of life. The school is the most important place which shapes the psycho-social behavior of individuals and hence the best place to impart in-depth life skills knowledge to an individual (WHO, 1994). Literature (e.g.: International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), 2011; UNICEF, 2001; Asrari, 2015; Vranda & Rao, 2001) shows that life skills education is an important intervention in reducing school dropouts, early marriages and other adolescence risk behavior.

In Sri Lanka, the White Paper on Education of 1981 proposed the new subject of life skills with the objective of giving students the opportunity to acquire skills needed for a range of vocations and psycho-social development (Gunawardane, 2013). A new subject ‘Life Competencies and Citizenship Education’ was incorporated into the school curricula in 1997 to be taught to students in Grades 6-9 and as a curriculum based optional subject for GCE O.L. (Widanapathirane

et al., 2014). However, Gunawardane (2013) expressed concern about deficiencies in formulation of objectives, development of content, adequacy of human and material resources available for implementation, the teaching learning process and supervision and monitoring for teaching the life competencies and citizenship education at Junior secondary level.

CONCLUSIONS

For both girls and boys, irrespective of being poor or better off, a majority of the dropouts are those who leave school after failing the GCE O.L exam. Among the poor, going for a second attempt, which is allowed while being enrolled in school, is rare, mainly because of the financial incapability of sitting the examination for a second time or because they believe that even a second attempt could be unsuccessful with their low access to extra educational resources. Among the poor children, many who leave school even before sitting GCE O.L. do so either because they think, with their poor access to resources, they will not pass the exam or, because they want to find employment to support their families and themselves. Among the better off, very often boys leave school preferring to do a job, or without hope of passing the exam even in a second attempt, or not wanting to continue formal education. For both poor and better off, in contrast to girls, boys leaving school wanting to do a job is clearly visible.

While poverty is an overarching reason for abandoning schooling, in the case of girls, there appears to exist an early marriage and dropout link though the direction of causality, whether early marriage is the cause or the consequence, is unclear. Sexual abuse and intimate relationships with the opposite sex tabooed by the schools, communities and the families, drove girls to leave school, being unable to bear the humiliation and rejection by peers, school and community and sometimes by the family. Humiliation and ridicule drive the children to a point of abandoning schooling being unable to cope with the hurt. Girls driven to leave school most often chose to cohabit with a man. Also there were cases where the girls left school unable to bear the ridicule put on them, not for a wrong they committed, but for a wrong committed by the father or the mother.

Except for a few cases, there was no evidence that early marriages are supported by parents and hence there appeared no evidence supporting 'prevalence of a custom of early marriages'. If early marriages were customary, then there could be no opposition from parents. Rather than being a custom, wanting to live with

a man or socially tabooed relationships entailed ridicule and rejection, driving the girl to live with a man appear to be a status quo. Overall, there is a clear indication of poor life skills among the girls which render them to mismanage their relations with men as well as their lives, very clear indications of severe breakdown of family, school and community engagement with children and very weak family structures. Weak families are more common among the poor. Often the absence of one parent or both and the absence of the engagement of parents with the child's life and education, or a home environment unfavourable to a child's life and education are common.

These findings clearly indicate the need of life skills education, especially to the girls, and the need of engagement of school, family and community in supporting children to continue education. Life skills knowledge and training will help girls to manage their lives, futures, relationships and education. School, family and community engagement with the children, which apparently is seriously lacking, will support girls to cope with education, without abandoning schooling. At present, although Life Competencies and Citizenship Education is a subject in the curricula for lower secondary children, observations in this study raises doubt of its effectiveness on the psycho-social behavior of children. Children even at lower secondary grades being vulnerable to abandoning education due to abuse or underage cohabitation or marriage, clearly shows the need of imparting life skills knowledge to girls starting at lower secondary, and the need of an educational policy decision of teaching life skills to all lower and upper secondary school children.

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APPENDIX 1

Dropout rate calculations based on actual numbers of children

Grade	Gender	2015			2016			2017		Average for All three years	
		Total number of children at start of year plus total number who dropped out during year.	Total number who dropped out during year	Dropout rate	Total number of children at start of year plus total number who dropped out during year	Total number who dropped out during year	Dropout rate	Total number who dropped out during year	Dropout rate		
6	Boys	256	5	2.0%	193	2	1.0%	197	3	1.5%	1.5%
7		257	4	1.6%	254	5	2.0%	191	1	0.5%	1.4%
8		228	11	4.8%	261	4	1.5%	249	6	2.4%	2.8%
9		263	11	4.2%	249	6	2.4%	250	1	0.4%	2.4%
10		242	5	2.1%	249	14	5.6%	249	11	4.4%	4.1%
11		233	112	48.1%	247	139	56.3%	235	83	35.3%	46.7%
12		94	9	9.6%	107	6	5.6%	96	1	1.0%	5.4%
13	56	0	0.0%	78	0	0.0%	92	1	1.1%	0.4%	
6	Girls	277	1	0.4%	229	2	0.9%	209	2	1.0%	0.7%
7		300	4	1.3%	281	4	1.4%	226	2	0.9%	1.2%
8		253	5	2.0%	299	1	0.3%	278	3	1.1%	1.1%
9		291	6	2.1%	257	7	2.7%	297	2	0.7%	1.8%
10		286	3	1.0%	285	4	1.4%	247	6	2.4%	1.6%
11		193	80	41.5%	276	86	31.2%	278	60	21.6%	30.3%
12		110	10	9.1%	122	10	8.2%	151	6	4.0%	6.8%
13	77	1	1.3%	78	0	0.0%	88	1	1.1%	0.8%	

Notes: (1) Total number of children at start of year plus total number who joined during year and the dropouts, are the total numbers in the sampled schools. The names of the schools not given here in order to maintain confidentiality of data from school records.

(2) Dropout rate is defined as the percentage share of dropouts from the total number of children at start of year plus total number who joined during year.

(3) Average for all three years is defined as the percentage share of dropouts in all three years from the total number of children at start of year plus total number who joined during year totalled for all three years.