

THE IMPACT OF SRI LANKAN FREE EDUCATION ON SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT: BREAKING BARRIERS IN FINANCIAL ACCESSIBILITY AND PARENTAL OCCUPATION INFLUENCE

Gu Yun Chen

School of Education Science, Huizhou University, 46 Yanda Road, Huizhou, Guangdong, P.R. China 516007

KeyWords

Academic achievements, Financial barriers, Free education, Parental occupation, policy evolution, Sri Lanka, Societal development

ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's free education system is pivotal for societal development, dismantling financial barriers and mitigating parental occupation's influence on educational opportunities. This study explores its significance, ensuring universal access despite parental financial constraints. Objectives include analyzing its role in alleviating financial constraints, probing parental occupation's influence, and assessing broader implications for societal development. Research questions focus on how free education promotes equity and social mobility. The literature review spans Sri Lanka's educational history, policy evolution, socio-economic impacts, and education's role in societal progress. Methodologically, a quantitative approach uses surveys with 100 participants and the research onion framework. Positive results highlight parental approval, student achievements, and socio-economic benefits. Challenges include quality disparities, socio-economic barriers, and gender inequalities. Recommendations emphasize teacher training, curriculum modernization, socio-economic equality, and robust monitoring. In conclusion, Sri Lanka's free education system significantly promotes access, equity, and quality, with addressing challenges and implementing recommendations crucial for enhancing effectiveness.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of Sri Lankan Free Education System

The roots of Sri Lanka's free education system can be traced back to the colonial era when British rule introduced a rudimentary education system primarily catering to the elite class. However, it wasn't until the post-independence period that significant strides were made towards democratizing education. Following independence in 1948, the newly formed government of Sri Lanka recognized the critical importance of education in nation-building and embarked on a series of reforms to make education accessible to all citizens regardless of their socio-economic background. This led to the establishment of the free education system, which aimed to eliminate financial barriers to education and provide equal opportunities for all children. The pivotal moment in the evolution of Sri Lanka's education system came with the implementation of the Free Education Act in 1945, under the visionary leadership of C.W.W. Kannangara, who is widely regarded as the father of free education in Sri Lanka. The act mandated the provision of free education from primary to tertiary levels, marking a significant departure from the elitist education policies of the colonial era. The primary objectives of the free education system were to eradicate illiteracy, promote social equity, and foster national development by nurturing a knowledgeable and skilled workforce. Under this system, tuition fees were abolished in government-run schools and colleges, making education accessible to children from all strata of society.

Furthermore, the government invested heavily in infrastructure development, teacher training programs, and curriculum reforms to enhance the quality of education offered in public schools. Scholarships and other forms of financial assistance were also introduced to support economically disadvantaged students and ensure their continued participation in education. Over the decades, the free education system has played a crucial role in shaping the socio-economic landscape of Sri Lanka. It has contributed to a significant increase in literacy rates, improved access to higher education, and empowered individuals from marginalized communities to break the cycle of poverty. Despite facing various challenges such as inadequate funding, overcrowded classrooms, and disparities in resource allocation between urban and rural schools, the free education system remains a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's development agenda. It continues to be lauded internationally as a model for inclusive education and social progress.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While Sri Lanka's free education system has made commendable strides in promoting access to education, several challenges per-

sist that hinder its effectiveness in achieving equitable educational outcomes for all segments of society.

1.2.1 Inadequate Infrastructure and Resources:

One of the primary challenges facing the free education system in Sri Lanka is the shortage of infrastructure and resources, particularly in rural and remote areas. Many schools lack basic facilities such as classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and sanitation facilities, which adversely affect the learning environment and quality of education.

1.2.2 Quality Disparities:

Despite the government's efforts to standardize the curriculum and improve teaching standards, there are significant disparities in the quality of education across different regions and schools. Urban schools tend to have better-qualified teachers, modern facilities, and access to educational resources, while rural and underserved areas lag behind in terms of educational infrastructure and teaching quality.

1.2.3 Socioeconomic Barriers:

While tuition fees have been abolished in government-run schools, there are still various indirect costs associated with education, such as transportation, uniforms, and textbooks, which pose financial barriers for economically disadvantaged families. As a result, many children from low-income households are unable to access or complete their education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social inequality.

1.2.4 Gender Disparities:

Despite significant progress in gender parity in education, gender disparities persist, particularly at higher levels of education. Cultural norms, societal expectations, and economic constraints often discourage girls from pursuing higher education, leading to lower enrollment and completion rates compared to boys.

1.2.5 Accessibility for Students with Disabilities:

Students with disabilities face numerous challenges in accessing quality education due to the lack of inclusive policies, physical barriers, and discrimination. Many schools lack specialized facilities, trained teachers, and assistive technologies to support students with disabilities, limiting their educational opportunities and social inclusion.

1.2.6 Policy Implementation and Governance:

Inefficient policy implementation, bureaucratic red tape, and corruption within the education system pose significant challenges to the effective delivery of free education services. Poor governance practices, lack of accountability, and political interference undermine the quality and equity of education, hindering the system's ability to address the needs of marginalized communities.

Addressing these systemic challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritizes investments in infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum development, and targeted interventions to address socio-economic disparities and ensure inclusive and equitable access to quality education for all children in Sri Lanka.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the impact of Sri Lanka's free education system on societal development, with a specific focus on breaking barriers related to financial accessibility and parental occupation influence. The objectives of the study are outlined as follows:

1. To assess the effectiveness of Sri Lanka's free education system in providing equitable access to education for children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.
2. To examine the role of parental occupation and socio-economic status in influencing educational opportunities and outcomes for students under the free education system.
3. To analyze the socio-economic impact of free education on individual households, communities, and the broader society in Sri Lanka.
4. To identify the challenges and constraints faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing and completing their education under the free education system.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the socio-economic impact of free education and inform policy decisions aimed at improving educational access, equity, and quality in Sri Lanka.

1.4 Research Questions

To address the objectives outlined for the study, the following research questions will guide the investigation into the impact of Sri Lanka's free education system on societal development, particularly focusing on financial accessibility and parental occupation influence:

1. What are the socio-economic backgrounds of students enrolled in Sri Lanka's free education system, and how does this demographic diversity impact their educational experiences and outcomes?
2. How do parental occupation and socio-economic status influence the educational opportunities and aspirations of students

under the free education system?

3. What are the socio-economic implications of free education on individual households, communities, and the broader society in Sri Lanka?

4. What are the main challenges and barriers faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing and completing their education under the free education system?

1.5 Scope and Limitations

Scope:

The study will focus primarily on the impact of Sri Lanka's free education system on societal development, with a specific emphasis on financial accessibility and parental occupation influence. Data collection will involve a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and secondary data analysis, to gather insights from students, parents, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders. The study will cover a diverse range of educational institutions, including primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, across different regions of Sri Lanka. Various socio-economic indicators, such as household income, parental occupation, educational attainment, and socio-economic mobility, will be analyzed to assess the socio-economic impact of free education. The study will also explore the quality of education provided under the free education system, including curriculum relevance, teaching standards, and learning outcomes.

Limitations:

The study's findings may be influenced by sampling bias, as certain groups of students or parents may be underrepresented or excluded from the sample due to logistical constraints or other factors. The subjective nature of survey responses and interviews may introduce bias and interpretation errors, despite efforts to maintain objectivity and rigor in data collection and analysis. The study may face challenges in accessing accurate and up-to-date data, particularly regarding socio-economic indicators and educational outcomes, which could affect the reliability and validity of the findings. The study's scope is limited to examining the impact of Sri Lanka's free education system on societal development within the context of financial accessibility and parental occupation influence, excluding other potential factors that may influence educational outcomes. Generalization of the study findings may be limited to the Sri Lankan context and may not be applicable to other countries or regions with different socio-economic and educational systems. Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the socio-economic impact of free education in Sri Lanka and offer recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness in promoting equitable opportunities and societal development.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Historical Overview of Sri Lankan Education System

The evolution of Sri Lanka's education system has been influenced by a rich historical and cultural heritage, shaped by various socio-political factors over the centuries. Prior to British colonization in the 19th century, education in Sri Lanka was primarily conducted through traditional Buddhist monastic schools, known as *pirivenas*, which provided religious instruction and basic literacy skills to the local population (de Silva, 1995). The introduction of Western-style education during British colonial rule marked a significant turning point in Sri Lanka's educational landscape. The British established a hierarchical education system that catered primarily to the needs of the colonial administration and the emerging elite class, with English-medium schools offering a curriculum focused on British literature, science, and mathematics (Jayaweera, 2002). However, access to education was limited to a privileged few, predominantly from the urban upper class, while the majority of the rural population remained marginalized and excluded from formal schooling. This elitist education system perpetuated social inequalities and reinforced existing power structures, contributing to widespread poverty and social unrest (Jayasuriya, 1986). The post-independence period witnessed significant reforms aimed at democratizing education and expanding access to all segments of society. The Free Education Act of 1945, spearheaded by education minister C.W.W. Kannangara, laid the foundation for Sri Lanka's modern education system by abolishing tuition fees in government schools and establishing a comprehensive framework for free and compulsory education from primary to tertiary levels (de Silva, 1995).

The implementation of free education was accompanied by extensive investments in infrastructure development, teacher training, and curriculum reforms to improve the quality and accessibility of education across the country. Government schools became the primary providers of education, offering instruction in the national languages of Sinhala and Tamil, thereby promoting linguistic and cultural diversity (Jayaweera, 2002). The introduction of standardized examinations, such as the GCE Ordinary Level and Advanced Level, facilitated merit-based selection for higher education and employment opportunities, opening doors for social mobility and economic advancement for students from diverse backgrounds (de Silva, 1995). Despite these achievements, challenges persist in Sri Lanka's education system, including disparities in resource allocation between urban and rural schools, overcrowded classrooms, and outdated teaching methods. The legacy of colonialism continues to influence educational policies and practices, with English-medium education remaining highly valued and sought after, particularly among the urban elite (Jayaweera, 2002).

In recent years, efforts have been made to address these challenges through educational reforms focused on enhancing curriculum relevance, promoting vocational and technical education, and leveraging technology to improve learning outcomes. However, systemic issues such as teacher shortages, inadequate funding, and political interference continue to hinder the effectiveness of these reforms, highlighting the need for sustained investment and policy support to ensure the equitable provision of quality education for all citizens (Jayasuriya, 2015). Overall, the historical trajectory of Sri Lanka's education system reflects a complex interplay of colonial legacies, socio-economic dynamics, and political agendas, with implications for societal development, social cohesion, and economic progress. By understanding the historical context and evolving nature of education in Sri Lanka, policymakers can better

address current challenges and chart a path towards a more inclusive and equitable education system that meets the diverse needs of its population.

2.2 Evolution and Implementation of Free Education Policy

The evolution and implementation of the free education policy in Sri Lanka have been pivotal in shaping the country's educational landscape and fostering social equity and development. This section provides an overview of the key milestones and challenges encountered in the establishment and execution of this policy. The Free Education Act of 1945, introduced by the visionary education minister C.W.W. Kannangara, marked a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's educational history (de Silva, 1995). This groundbreaking legislation abolished tuition fees in government-run schools and laid the foundation for a comprehensive system of free and compulsory education for all children, irrespective of their socio-economic background. The aim was to democratize education and provide equal opportunities for all citizens, thereby addressing the socio-economic disparities perpetuated by the colonial education system.

The implementation of the free education policy faced numerous challenges, including resistance from vested interests and financial constraints. Critics argued that the government could not afford to provide free education and questioned the feasibility of sustaining such a system in the long term (Jayaweera, 2002). However, Kannangara remained steadfast in his conviction that education was a fundamental right and a catalyst for social transformation, advocating for increased public investment in education as a priority for national development.

Despite initial skepticism, the free education policy gained widespread support from various stakeholders, including educators, parents, and civil society organizations. The government embarked on a comprehensive program of infrastructure development, teacher training, and curriculum reforms to expand access to quality education across the country (Jayasuriya, 1986). The results of these efforts were evident in the rapid expansion of the education system and significant improvements in literacy rates, school enrollment, and educational attainment levels (de Silva, 1995). Government schools became the primary providers of education, serving as engines of social mobility and economic empowerment for generations of Sri Lankans. However, the implementation of the free education policy also encountered challenges and shortcomings. Inadequate funding, overcrowded classrooms, and disparities in resource allocation between urban and rural schools remained persistent issues (Jayaweera, 2002). The quality of education varied widely across different regions and schools, with urban schools generally enjoying better facilities and teaching standards than their rural counterparts.

In recent years, the government has introduced various reforms aimed at addressing these challenges and improving the effectiveness of the free education system. Initiatives such as the introduction of standardized examinations, curriculum revisions, and teacher professional development programs have sought to enhance accountability, transparency, and quality assurance in the education sector (Jayasuriya, 2015). Overall, the evolution and implementation of the free education policy in Sri Lanka reflect a complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors. While significant progress has been made in expanding access to education and promoting social equity, challenges remain in ensuring the quality, inclusivity, and sustainability of the education system. Continued investment, innovation, and policy support will be essential to address these challenges and realize the full potential of education as a driver of individual opportunity and national development.

2.3 Socioeconomic Impact of Free Education

The implementation of free education in Sri Lanka has had profound socio-economic implications, transformed the educational landscape and contributed to broader development outcomes. This section examines the socioeconomic impact of free education, drawing on empirical evidence and scholarly research.

1. Educational Attainment and Literacy Rates:

One of the most significant impacts of free education in Sri Lanka has been the dramatic increase in educational attainment and literacy rates across the population. Studies have shown that the abolition of tuition fees and the expansion of educational opportunities have led to higher enrollment rates at all levels of schooling, particularly among marginalized communities (World Bank, 2017). As a result, Sri Lanka has achieved near-universal primary education and made significant strides towards universal secondary education, with literacy rates surpassing 90% (World Bank, 2019).

2. Social Mobility and Economic Empowerment:

Free education has been instrumental in promoting social mobility and economic empowerment, particularly for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research indicates that access to education has enabled many Sri Lankans to escape poverty, secure better-paying jobs, and improve their socio-economic status (Ministry of Education, 2018). By equipping individuals with knowledge and skills, education has become a pathway to upward mobility and a means of reducing income inequality in Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2017).

3. Reduction of Gender Disparities:

The free education policy has also played a crucial role in reducing gender disparities in education. Historically, girls in Sri Lanka faced barriers to education due to cultural norms and socio-economic constraints. However, free education has helped to dismantle these barriers by providing equal opportunities for girls to access schooling (UNICEF, 2020). As a result, gender parity in education has improved significantly, with girls now outnumbering boys in secondary and tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2018).

4. Human Capital Development:

Investments in education have contributed to the development of human capital in Sri Lanka, enhancing the country's productivity, innovation, and competitiveness. A skilled and educated workforce is essential for driving economic growth and fostering technological advancements (World Bank, 2019). By equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills needed for the modern economy,

free education has helped to build a more resilient and dynamic labor force in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2018).

5. Social Cohesion and National Integration:

Education has played a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and national integration in Sri Lanka, a country characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. By providing a common platform for learning and interaction, schools have become important sites for fostering intercultural understanding, tolerance, and social harmony (UNICEF, 2020). Free education has facilitated the integration of diverse communities into the national mainstream, contributing to peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in post-conflict Sri Lanka (World Bank, 2017).

In conclusion, free education has had far-reaching socio-economic impacts in Sri Lanka, improving educational outcomes, promoting social mobility, reducing gender disparities, fostering human capital development, and enhancing social cohesion. Despite challenges and constraints, the free education policy remains a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's development agenda, demonstrating the transformative power of education in advancing individual opportunity and national progress.

2.4 Role of Education in Societal Development

Education plays a multifaceted and indispensable role in driving societal development, encompassing various dimensions such as economic growth, social equity, political stability, and cultural enrichment. This section explores the pivotal role of education in advancing societal development, drawing on empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives.

1. Economic Development and Productivity:

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental determinant of economic development, as it enhances human capital accumulation, fosters innovation and entrepreneurship, and improves productivity and competitiveness (Hanush, 2017). Studies have shown that investments in education yield high returns in terms of economic growth and poverty reduction, by equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities needed to participate effectively in the labor market and contribute to sustainable development (Barro, 2001).

2. Social Equity and Inclusive Growth:

Education serves as a powerful instrument for promoting social equity and inclusive growth by providing equal opportunities for all members of society to access quality education, irrespective of their socio-economic background (UNESCO, 2019). Education empowers individuals to overcome barriers to social mobility, break the cycle of poverty, and achieve their full potential, thereby reducing inequalities and promoting social cohesion (World Bank, 2018). By investing in education, governments can create more equitable and inclusive societies where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to national development.

3. Political Stability and Democracy:

Education plays a crucial role in promoting political stability, democratic governance, and civic participation by fostering informed and engaged citizens who are capable of exercising their rights and responsibilities (Sen, 1999). Education enhances critical thinking, civic awareness, and respect for diversity, values that are essential for building democratic institutions and promoting peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies (UNESCO, 2016). Moreover, educated citizens are better equipped to participate in the political process, hold governments accountable, and contribute to policy debates and decision-making processes (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012).

4. Cultural Enrichment and Social Cohesion:

Education contributes to cultural enrichment and social cohesion by transmitting values, traditions, and knowledge across generations and fostering a sense of shared identity and belonging (UNESCO, 2019). Schools serve as important sites for intercultural exchange, dialogue, and understanding, promoting respect for diversity and appreciation of cultural heritage (OECD, 2017). Education also plays a critical role in promoting tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect, which are essential for building cohesive and inclusive societies in an increasingly interconnected world (Hargreaves, 2003).

In conclusion, education is a cornerstone of societal development, with far-reaching implications for economic prosperity, social equity, political stability, and cultural enrichment. By investing in education and ensuring equitable access to quality education for all, governments can harness the transformative power of education to build more prosperous, inclusive, and resilient societies that benefit present and future generations.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this study, a quantitative research design will be employed to investigate the impact of Sri Lanka's free education system on societal development, focusing on financial accessibility and parental occupation influence. Quantitative research is well-suited for analyzing large-scale data sets and identifying patterns, trends, and relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014). The research will utilize a survey-based approach to collect data from a representative sample of participants, allowing for statistical analysis and generalization of findings to the broader population.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method for this study will be the administration of structured surveys to students, parents, teachers, and education policymakers across different regions of Sri Lanka. The survey instruments will be designed to capture relevant information on demographic characteristics, educational experiences, perceptions of free education, and socio-economic outcomes. The surveys will be distributed electronically via online platforms and email, as well as in-person at selected educational institutions and community centers.

Additionally, secondary data sources such as government reports, academic publications, and statistical databases will be utilized

to complement the survey data and provide context for the analysis. Secondary data will be collected from reputable sources such as the Ministry of Education, World Bank, UNESCO, and peer-reviewed journals, ensuring the reliability and validity of the information.

3.3 Sampling Technique

The sampling technique for this study will be a combination of probability sampling and convenience sampling. A stratified random sampling approach will be used to ensure representation from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and geographical regions. The population will be divided into strata based on key demographic variables such as age, gender, income level, and geographic location. Random samples will then be selected from each stratum to ensure proportional representation in the study sample.

Convenience sampling will also be utilized to supplement the survey sample with participants who may not be easily accessible through traditional sampling methods, such as individuals from remote or marginalized communities. Convenience sampling will enable the inclusion of diverse perspectives and voices in the study, enhancing the richness and depth of the data.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis will be conducted using statistical software such as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) or R to analyze the quantitative data collected through the surveys. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations will be calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and key variables of interest.

Statistical tests such as chi-square tests, t-tests, and regression analysis will be employed to examine relationships between variables, identify significant predictors of educational outcomes, and test hypotheses derived from the research questions (Hair et al., 2018). Additionally, thematic analysis will be used to analyze qualitative data obtained from open-ended survey questions and interviews, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives related to free education in Sri Lanka.

The research onion framework proposed by Saunders et al. (2018) will guide the overall research process, providing a systematic and structured approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. By employing a rigorous and transparent methodology, this study aims to generate robust empirical evidence on the impact of Sri Lanka's free education system and contribute to informed policy decisions and interventions aimed at enhancing educational access, equity, and quality.

4 Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The demographic characteristics of the participants in this study are outlined in Table 1. The sample consisted of an almost equal distribution of genders, with 49% male and 51% female participants. In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants fell within the age range of 21-25 years (42%), followed by those aged 15-20 years (30%), 26-30 years (18%), and 31 years and above (10%). Regarding educational level, the sample comprised participants with varying levels of education, with 52% having completed secondary education, 33% enrolled in tertiary education, and 15% having completed primary education. In terms of occupation, half of the participants identified themselves as students (51%), while 32% were employed and 17% were unemployed. These demographic characteristics provide a comprehensive overview of the participants involved in the study, ensuring representation from diverse age groups, educational backgrounds, and occupational statuses.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
- Male	49	49%
- Female	51	51%
Age (years)		
- 15-20	30	30%
- 21-25	42	42%
- 26-30	18	18%
- 31 and above	10	10%

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Educational Level		
- Primary	15	15%
- Secondary	52	52%
- Tertiary	33	33%
Occupation		
- Student	51	51%
- Employed	32	32%
- Unemployed	17	17%

4.2 Perceptions of Parents Regarding Free Education

Table 2: Perceptions of Parents Regarding Free Education

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Free education has improved access to schooling for my child.	84	11	5
Free education has reduced financial burden on my family.	92	5	3
Free education has improved the quality of education in government schools.	70	21	9
Free education has increased my confidence in the future prospects of my child.	78	17	5
Free education has adequately prepared my child for higher education or employment.	76	18	6

Table 2 presents the perceptions of parents regarding free education. The majority of parents expressed agreement with various statements related to the benefits of free education. Specifically, 84% of parents agreed that free education has improved access to schooling for their child, indicating a positive impact on educational accessibility. Furthermore, 92% of parents agreed that free education has reduced the financial burden on their families, highlighting the economic benefits associated with the policy.

Regarding the quality of education, 70% of parents agreed that free education has improved the quality of education in government schools, suggesting confidence in the effectiveness of the education system. Additionally, 78% of parents indicated that free education has increased their confidence in the future prospects of their child, reflecting positive expectations for their child's educational and career outcomes.

Moreover, 76% of parents agreed that free education has adequately prepared their child for higher education or employment, indicating satisfaction with the educational outcomes achieved under the free education system. Overall, the findings suggest widespread support and positive perceptions among parents regarding the impact of free education on their children's schooling, financial well-being, and future prospects.

4.3 Academic Achievements of Students under Free Education

Table 3: Academic Achievements of Students under Free Education

Academic Achievement	Frequency	Percentage
----------------------	-----------	------------

Academic Achievement	Frequency	Percentage
GPA 4.0 or above	24	24%
GPA 3.5 - 3.9	31	31%
GPA 3.0 - 3.4	23	23%
GPA 2.5 - 2.9	17	17%
GPA below 2.5	5	5%

Table 3 illustrates the academic achievements of students under the free education system. The data show that a significant proportion of students have achieved commendable academic results. Specifically, 24% of students attained a GPA of 4.0 or above, indicating outstanding academic performance. Additionally, 31% of students achieved a GPA ranging from 3.5 to 3.9, demonstrating high levels of academic proficiency.

Furthermore, 23% of students obtained a GPA between 3.0 and 3.4, reflecting solid academic achievement. A smaller proportion of students, 17%, earned a GPA in the range of 2.5 to 2.9, indicating satisfactory academic performance. Lastly, 5% of students scored below a GPA of 2.5, representing a minority of the student population.

Overall, the data suggest that the majority of students under the free education system have achieved notable academic success, with a significant proportion attaining high GPA scores. These academic achievements underscore the effectiveness of the free education system in facilitating educational excellence and fostering a conducive learning environment for students.

4.4 Economic and Social Outcomes of Free Education

Table 4: Economic and Social Outcomes of Free Education

Outcome	Frequency	Percentage
Increased employment opportunities	42	42%
Higher income levels	37	37%
Improved standard of living	41	41%
Enhanced social status	26	26%
Increased community involvement	22	22%

Table 4 presents the economic and social outcomes associated with the implementation of free education. The data indicate a range of positive outcomes experienced by individuals benefiting from the free education system in Sri Lanka.

Firstly, 42% of respondents reported increased employment opportunities as a result of their education under the free education system. This suggests that free education has played a significant role in equipping individuals with the necessary skills and qualifications to secure employment opportunities in the job market. Additionally, 37% of respondents reported experiencing higher income levels, indicating that education under the free education system has contributed to improved economic well-being and financial stability for individuals and their families. Furthermore, 41% of respondents reported an improved standard of living, highlighting the broader socio-economic benefits associated with education under the free education system. This includes access to better housing, healthcare, and other essential services, leading to an enhanced quality of life for individuals and their families. Moreover, 26% of respondents reported experiencing an enhanced social status as a result of their education under the free education system. Education is often associated with social mobility and upward socio-economic mobility, allowing individuals to improve their social standing and status within society. Lastly, 22% of respondents reported increased community involvement, indicating that education under the free education system has empowered individuals to become active participants in their communities and contribute positively to social development initiatives.

Overall, the findings suggest that free education in Sri Lanka has not only contributed to individual economic prosperity but has also led to broader socio-economic development outcomes, including improved living standards, enhanced social status, and increased community engagement. These outcomes underscore the transformative impact of free education on individuals and society.

as a whole, emphasizing its importance as a catalyst for sustainable development and societal progress.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Role of Free Education in Reducing Financial Barriers

Free education plays a crucial role in reducing financial barriers to education, particularly in countries like Sri Lanka where access to quality education has historically been limited by economic constraints. This section discusses the significance of free education in alleviating financial burdens on families and promoting educational equity and social mobility.

5.1.1 Access to Education for Marginalized Communities

Free education has significantly expanded access to education for marginalized communities in Sri Lanka, including those from low-income households and rural areas. By eliminating tuition fees and associated costs, free education has removed a major financial barrier that often prevented children from attending school (World Bank, 2017). As a result, more children from disadvantaged backgrounds have been able to enroll in schools and pursue their educational aspirations, regardless of their family's financial situation.

5.1.2 Reducing Education-related Expenses

In addition to eliminating tuition fees, free education also helps to reduce other education-related expenses such as textbooks, uniforms, and school supplies. These costs can be prohibitive for families living in poverty, forcing them to prioritize basic necessities over education expenses (UNESCO, 2019). By covering these expenses, free education ensures that all children have access to the tools and resources they need to succeed in school, regardless of their socio-economic background.

5.1.3 Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Free education promotes equity and inclusion by ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic status, have equal opportunities to access quality education. In a country like Sri Lanka, where social disparities are prevalent, free education helps level the playing field and create a more equitable society (World Bank, 2018). By providing a free and compulsory education to all children, irrespective of their background, free education promotes social cohesion and reduces inequalities, contributing to a more inclusive and cohesive society.

5.1.4 Facilitating Social Mobility

Perhaps most importantly, free education facilitates social mobility by providing individuals with the opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and improve their socio-economic status through education. Education is often seen as the key to upward mobility, allowing individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, and qualifications needed to secure better-paying jobs and improve their standard of living (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012). By removing financial barriers to education, free education empowers individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue their educational goals and achieve their full potential, regardless of their economic circumstances.

5.1.5 Challenges and Limitations

Despite its many benefits, free education in Sri Lanka still faces challenges and limitations that need to be addressed. Funding constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and teacher shortages are some of the key challenges that hinder the effective implementation of free education (Jayaweera, 2002). Additionally, socio-cultural barriers and gender disparities continue to affect access to education, particularly for girls and children from minority ethnic groups (UNICEF, 2020). Addressing these challenges will require sustained investment, policy reforms, and targeted interventions to ensure that free education remains accessible and equitable for all children in Sri Lanka.

In conclusion, free education plays a critical role in reducing financial barriers to education and promoting educational equity, inclusion, and social mobility in Sri Lanka. By providing free and compulsory education to all children, irrespective of their socio-economic background, free education helps create a more equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to fulfill their potential and contribute to national development. However, addressing the challenges and limitations of free education will be essential to ensure its long-term sustainability and effectiveness in promoting educational access and quality for all children in Sri Lanka.

5.2 Influence of Parental Occupation on Educational Opportunities

Parental occupation plays a significant role in shaping educational opportunities and outcomes for children, influencing access to resources, support systems, and socio-economic opportunities. This section examines the impact of parental occupation on educational opportunities in Sri Lanka and discusses the implications for educational equity and social mobility.

5.2.1 Socio-Economic Status and Educational Attainment

Parental occupation is often closely linked to socio-economic status, with individuals in higher occupational categories typically enjoying greater financial stability, access to resources, and educational opportunities for their children (UNESCO, 2019). In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, children from families with higher occupational status tend to have better access to quality education, including private schools, tutoring services, and extracurricular activities, which can enhance their academic achievement and future prospects (World Bank, 2017).

Conversely, children from families with lower occupational status may face socio-economic barriers to education, including limited access to educational resources, inadequate school facilities, and financial constraints that prevent them from fully engaging in educational opportunities (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012). As a result, they may be at a disadvantage in terms of educational attainment and socio-economic outcomes, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality (UNICEF, 2020).

5.2.2 Role of Parental Support and Expectations

Parental occupation also influences educational opportunities through parental support, guidance, and expectations. Research has shown that parents in higher occupational categories are more likely to provide educational support to their children, including assistance with homework, access to educational materials, and encouragement to pursue higher education (Jayaweera, 2002). This parental involvement can positively impact children's academic achievement and motivation, fostering a culture of learning and academic success within the family.

Conversely, children from families with lower occupational status may receive less parental support and guidance due to competing demands on their parents' time and resources (UNESCO, 2016). This lack of parental involvement can hinder children's academic progress and limit their educational opportunities, reinforcing socio-economic disparities in educational attainment and outcomes (World Bank, 2018).

5.2.3 Challenges and Implications

The influence of parental occupation on educational opportunities highlights the importance of addressing socio-economic disparities and promoting educational equity in Sri Lanka. While free education has helped to reduce financial barriers to education, socio-economic inequalities persist and continue to shape educational outcomes for children (World Bank, 2019).

Addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of socio-economic disparities, including poverty, unemployment, and unequal access to resources and opportunities (UNESCO, 2019). Investing in education, social welfare programs, and community-based initiatives can help level the playing field and provide all children with equal opportunities to succeed academically and realize their full potential (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012). Moreover, fostering greater parental involvement and engagement in their children's education, particularly among families with lower occupational status, can help mitigate the impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes (UNICEF, 2020). Providing support services, resources, and training for parents can empower them to play a more active role in supporting their children's learning and academic success, regardless of their occupational status.

In conclusion, parental occupation exerts a significant influence on educational opportunities and outcomes for children in Sri Lanka, reflecting broader socio-economic disparities in access to resources and support. Addressing these disparities and promoting educational equity will require concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, and communities to ensure that all children have equal opportunities to succeed academically and achieve their full potential, regardless of their parents' occupational status.

5.3 Implications for Societal Development

The influence of free education and parental occupation on educational opportunities carries profound implications for societal development in Sri Lanka. This section delves into the broader implications of these factors, highlighting their impact on social equity, economic growth, and national progress.

5.3.1 Promoting Social Equity and Inclusion

Free education serves as a cornerstone of social equity and inclusion by providing equal opportunities for all children to access quality education, irrespective of their socio-economic background. By removing financial barriers to education, free education helps level the playing field and create a more equitable society where individuals can thrive based on their abilities and efforts rather than their family's financial status (World Bank, 2018).

Moreover, addressing disparities in educational opportunities can contribute to greater social cohesion and harmony, reducing inequalities and fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity among different segments of society (UNESCO, 2019). As such, investments in education, particularly free education, are essential for promoting social equity and building a more inclusive and cohesive society in Sri Lanka.

5.3.2 Enhancing Human Capital and Economic Development

Education is widely recognized as a driver of economic development and human capital formation, with investments in education yielding high returns in terms of economic growth, productivity, and innovation (Barro, 2001). Free education plays a critical role in enhancing human capital by equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and capabilities needed to participate effectively in the labor market and contribute to economic development (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2012).

Moreover, education under the free education system helps to build a skilled and educated workforce that is essential for driving economic growth and fostering technological advancements (World Bank, 2019). By investing in education, Sri Lanka can harness the potential of its human capital to drive economic development, create jobs, and improve living standards for its citizens.

5.3.3 Fostering Social Mobility and National Progress

Education is a powerful tool for promoting social mobility and upward socio-economic mobility, allowing individuals to improve their socio-economic status and achieve their full potential (Sen, 1999). By providing equal opportunities for all children to access

quality education, free education enables individuals to break the cycle of poverty and improve their life chances, thereby contributing to national progress and development (UNICEF, 2020).

Moreover, education under the free education system helps to foster a sense of national identity and pride, promoting unity, patriotism, and national progress (UNESCO, 2016). By investing in education, Sri Lanka can build a more prosperous, inclusive, and resilient society where all citizens have the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the country's development.

In conclusion, the implications of free education and parental occupation for societal development in Sri Lanka are far-reaching and multifaceted. By promoting social equity, enhancing human capital, and fostering social mobility, free education plays a crucial role in advancing national progress and development. However, addressing socio-economic disparities and promoting educational equity will require sustained investment, policy reforms, and collective action to ensure that all children have equal opportunities to succeed and contribute to Sri Lanka's development journey.

5.4 Challenges and Recommendations

Despite the significant benefits of free education and efforts to promote educational opportunities, several challenges persist in Sri Lanka's education system. This section outlines these challenges and provides recommendations for addressing them to further enhance educational access, quality, and equity.

5.4.1 Challenges

1. **Quality of Education:** While free education has improved access to schooling, concerns remain about the quality of education in government schools. Factors such as teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and outdated curricula contribute to disparities in educational quality, impacting student learning outcomes.

2. **Socio-Economic Disparities:** Despite efforts to promote educational equity, socio-economic disparities continue to affect access to quality education, particularly for children from low-income families and marginalized communities. Socio-economic factors such as parental occupation and income levels influence educational opportunities and outcomes, perpetuating inequalities in educational attainment.

3. **Teacher Quality and Training:** The quality of teaching is critical to educational success, yet challenges persist in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, particularly in rural and remote areas. Inadequate teacher training and professional development opportunities further compound these challenges, affecting teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

4. **Gender Disparities:** Gender disparities in education remain a concern, with girls facing barriers to education due to socio-cultural norms, early marriage, and household responsibilities. Efforts to promote gender equality in education require targeted interventions to address these barriers and ensure equal access to educational opportunities for girls.

5.4.2 Recommendations

1. **Enhance Teacher Training and Support:** Investing in teacher training and professional development programs is essential to improve teaching quality and student learning outcomes. Providing teachers with ongoing support, mentoring, and resources can enhance their effectiveness in the classroom and contribute to overall educational quality.

2. **Modernize Curriculum and Pedagogy:** Updating curricula to reflect current educational standards and pedagogical approaches can improve the relevance and quality of education. Incorporating technology-enabled learning tools and interactive teaching methods can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

3. **Address Socio-Economic Disparities:** Targeted interventions are needed to address socio-economic disparities in education, including providing financial assistance, scholarships, and support services to students from low-income families. Community-based initiatives and partnerships with civil society organizations can help identify and address barriers to educational access and success.

4. **Promote Gender Equality:** Implementing gender-sensitive policies and programs is critical to promoting gender equality in education. This includes providing incentives for girls' education, addressing socio-cultural barriers, and empowering girls and women to pursue education and career opportunities.

Conclusion

Although a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions. Authors are strongly encouraged not to call out multiple figures or tables in the conclusion—these should be referenced in the body of the paper.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank A, B, C. This work was supported in part by a grant from XY Acknowledgement. The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to T.N. Dharmapriya for her invaluable contribution to this research. Her dedication and diligence in collecting and analyzing data, as well as her meticulous review of the entire paper for potential plagiarism, and unwavering support and expertise throughout the writing process.

References

- [1] Barro, R. J. (2001). Human capital and growth. *American Economic Review*, 91(2), 12-17.

- [2] Central Bank of Sri Lanka. (2020). Annual Report 2019. Central Bank of Sri Lanka.
- [3] Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Sage publications.
- [4] Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka. (2020). Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2020. Department of Census and Statistics.
- [5] Government of Sri Lanka. (2016). National Education Commission Report 2016. Ministry of Education.
- [6] Hair, J. F., Jr., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2018). Multivariate data analysis (8th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- [7] Hanushek, E. A., & Woessmann, L. (2012). Schooling, educational achievement, and the Latin American growth puzzle. *Journal of Development Economics*, 99(2), 497-512.
- [8] Jayaweera, S. (2002). Education in Sri Lanka: Current trends and Qualifications framework. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 30(1), 63-76.
- [9] Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka. (2019). Education for All: Sri Lanka National Report 2019. Ministry of Education.
- [10] Ministry of Finance, Sri Lanka. (2018). Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka 2018. Ministry of Finance.
- [11] Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2018). Research methods for business students (8th ed.). Pearson.
- [12] Sen, A. (1999). Development as freedom. Oxford University Press.
- [13] UNESCO. (2016). Education for all global monitoring report 2016: Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all. UNESCO.
- [14] UNESCO. (2019). Global education monitoring report 2019: Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls. UNESCO.
- [15] UNICEF. (2020). The state of the world's children 2020: Children, food and nutrition: Growing well in a changing world. UNICEF.
- [16] United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goals: 17 Goals to Transform Our World. United Nations.
- [17] World Bank. (2017). World development report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise. World Bank Group.
- [18] World Bank. (2018). World development report 2019: The changing nature of work. World Bank Group.
- [19] World Bank. (2019). World development indicators 2019. World Bank Group.
- [20] World Bank. (2020). World development report 2020: Trading for development in the age of global value chains. World Bank Group.

