

The Impact of Increased Cost of Living on Students' Learning

Pradeepan, S., Vijayatheepan, R

Department of Science & Technology Education, Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka faced its worst period of increased cost of living in 2022. It was a difficult time even to provide basic needs to the general public. There is a scarcity of data regarding the impact on the learning of students from Grade 10 to Grade 13 due to the current increase in the cost of living in Sri Lanka. This research was conducted with the objective of identifying the impacts caused by the current increased cost of living on students studying in Grade 10 to Grade 13 in Tamil medium schools in the plantation area of the Hanguranketha educational zone. In this study, research was conducted on topics including the impact on learning caused by the increased cost of living, nutrition and health, transportation, purchasing of books and learning equipment, energy resources, learning methods, impacts caused by students' socioeconomic factors, and recommendations needed to recover from these impacts. This research is a descriptive survey study covering all Tamil medium schools in Hanguranketha, involving 181 students, 41 parents, 68 teachers, and 8 principals. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documents, and analyzed using SPSS-21 software. Although the families of most students live below the poverty line and are able to obtain three meals a day, the increased cost of living has impacted the acquisition of nutritious food. The ability to obtain nutritious food shows a direct correlation with family income. Arriving late to school and the difficulty in obtaining school bags, learning equipment, photocopies, smartphones, and internet facilities have emerged as major issues affecting most students. The acquisition of these items and the average monthly expenditure on education show a direct correlation with the monthly family income. Frequent power outages have impacted the learning of most students by reducing study time and causing disruptions in online classes. Most students participated in private education; however, there is no correlation between the amount spent on private education and the monthly family income. This study concludes that the current increased cost of living in Sri Lanka has created a noticeable impact on the learning of students from Grade 10 to Grade 13 in the specified schools, and various measures must be taken at different levels to address this.

Keywords: Increased cost of living in Sri Lanka, Impacts on learning, Grade 10 to Grade 13 students, Advanced Level students.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

As the full burden of increased costs has now escalated into a debt crisis, the Ceylon Electricity Board is forced to postpone cash payments to suppliers by taking on large-scale loans. Accordingly, the proposed electricity reforms aim to manage the debt crisis and ensure timely payments to suppliers due to the gradual increase in the price of essential commodities (Ceylon Electricity Board, 2025). To meet these expenses, electricity tariffs need to be increased by 18.3%. The Public Utilities Commission has been informed in the interim financial report of the Ceylon Electricity Board that a loss of 18 billion rupees occurred in the first quarter of 2025 (PUCSL, 2025).

In recent times, residents have reported that power has been disconnected in areas surrounding the Ingiriya region due to strong winds, and the Electricity Board has been unable to restore it. It has also been reported that students appearing for the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examinations faced great difficulties, and self-employed individuals were unable to carry out their work (Madawala News, 25 March 2025). In 2025, scheduled power outages occurred nationwide for specific hours. Fluctuations in power transmission (increased electricity

supply...) was stated by the Ceylon Electricity Board (Ceylon Electricity Board, 2025).

In Sri Lanka, the highest number of underweight children are born in the Nuwara Eliya district. Nutritional deficiencies are more prevalent in districts such as Nuwara Eliya, Trincomalee, Badulla, and Batticaloa compared to other regions in Sri Lanka (Save The Children, 2023). Nuwara Eliya district is where children and mothers are most affected by malnutrition in Sri Lanka. Although other districts also have people affected by malnutrition, the death rate of children and pregnant mothers is increasing specifically in the Nuwara Eliya district. This is a serious threat. Specifically, a study conducted in 2020 found that 34% of children under the age of five in the plantation areas were stunted. According to the latest Demographic and Health Survey, one in four children was found to be suffering from underweight and malnutrition. Additionally, it has been reported that 72,000 children are suffering from moderate or long-term malnutrition (World Health Organization, 2022). According to a recent World Bank estimate, Sri Lanka ranks 5th among the countries most severely affected by food inflation. Sri Lanka's worst increase in the cost of living since independence has emerged from a severe food crisis. Abdul Rahim Siddiqui, a representative of the World Food Programme, stated that the average monthly cost of nutritious food has risen by 156% since 2018 (World Food Programme, 2022).

It has been reported that 217 students in Tamil medium schools in the Hanguranketha education zone dropped out of school during the 2015-2020 period. Factors such as family economic status, the distance between school and home, lack of interest in their children's education, parents' educational level, increased alcohol consumption, and parents not living with their children have been pointed out as reasons for student dropouts. In 2023, 79 students dropped out in the Hanguranketha education zone (Right to Information Commission, 2024). Taxes imposed on school equipment should be reduced. However, Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Teachers' Union, stated that manufacturing companies have informed that the prices of equipment have been increased considering the costs of electricity and fuel.

(Stalin stated...) (Tamilwin.com, 2025). Nirukumar, President of the Sri Lanka Small Industry Association, stated that due to the decline in the value of the dollar, the prices of school equipment, including exercise books, have been reduced by 20%. He further mentioned that if the 18% VAT and 2.5% Social Security Contribution Levy (SSCL) on paper were removed, the prices of exercise books and school equipment could be reduced even further (malaiyagam.lk, Jan 2, 2025). Students from low-income families, students from marginalized communities, urban students affected by poverty, those from fishing communities, and students from the war-affected North and East are the ones most severely impacted by this crisis. As education continues to become more expensive, the ability of free education to serve as a tool for social mobility and social justice is steadily diminishing. Due to our free education system being pushed into such a state, it is necessary to reflect on the reasons for the inability to take measures against students distancing themselves from the field of education (Thiruvarangan, 2022). Increasing inflation, daily power cuts, and shortages of food, medicine, and fuel have gone beyond the coping capacity of families. Furthermore, it is noted that due to economic pressure on families, one in ten children has lost their appetite, and irritability has increased (Save the Children, 2022). Due to the current increased cost of living, many children of plantation workers are dropping out of school to seek employment. In this trend, boys are heading to urban areas, while girls are seeking income in nearby garment factories (Mangaladharsini, 2023). It was predicted that Sri Lanka's economy would see a growth of 2.2% in 2024, showing signs of recovery after the economic collapse of 2022. However, the country continues to face issues such as high poverty levels, income inequality, and labor market concerns, which have created a significant impact on the learning of plantation school students (World Bank, 2024). After independence, the hill-country plantation community emerged as a group unable to access free education in this country. This plight lasted for about 40 years; even after plantation schools were gradually absorbed by the government and converted into provincial schools, the misfortune of not being able to fully enjoy free education continues (Vishnu, 2024).

Objective of the Research

The objective of this research is to identify the impacts of the current increased cost of living in Sri Lanka on the learning of students from Grade 10 to Grade 13 in Tamil medium schools within the Hanguranketha education zone.

Research Goals

Research goals are essential to carry out the study within a defined scope, to plan the desired achievements for Sri Lanka, and to obtain the expected outcomes. In that regard, the following are the goals of this research:

1. To identify the impacts caused by the increased cost of living on nutrition and health.
2. To identify the impacts caused by the increased cost of living and family economic status on learning.
3. To identify the impacts caused by the increased cost of living on the transportation of students from Grade 10 to Grade 13.
4. To identify the impacts caused by the increased cost of living on obtaining equipment necessary for learning.
5. To identify the impacts caused by the lack of availability of energy resources (electricity, fuel) due to the increased cost of living on students' learning.
6. To provide recommendations to mitigate the impacts caused by the increased cost of living on the learning of students from Grade 10 to Grade 13.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research published regarding the impact of increased cost of living on students' learning is very limited. Generally, factors such as transportation for students and loss of parental employment impact their learning. A few research papers were available regarding these impacts. Some research findings also indicate that family facilities and transportation affect students' school attendance. It can be expected that economic problems in Sri Lanka, by affecting family facilities and transportation, could impact student attendance. In some research articles, it has been mentioned that the loss of parental employment affects students in pursuing higher education. The current increased cost of living in Sri Lanka has caused job losses for many. In that context, a literature review for this research title, "**The Impact of Increased Cost of Living in Sri Lanka on Students' Learning**," is conducted under the following headings:

1. Students' nutritional and health deficiencies and their impacts on learning.
2. Parents' economic status and its impact on students' learning.
3. Students' transportation difficulties and their impacts on learning.
4. Issues in obtaining learning inputs and equipment and their impacts on learning.
5. Lack of availability of energy resources and its impact on students' learning.
6. The impact of increased cost of living on learning methods.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design has been used to conduct the aforementioned research. Since both quantitative and qualitative data are obtained to conduct the study, it follows a mixed methods research approach.

Research Design

In academic research, the design is determined based on the researcher's objective, the nature of the study, and environmental factors. Various types of research have been followed by researchers based on changing conditions such as the research title, objective, population, and research environment. Since the researcher needs to obtain information related to the chosen topic qualitatively and quantitatively, this study is conducted through a descriptive situational analysis method.

Research Method

This study is carried out as a mixed research using qualitative and quantitative data. For primary data, questionnaires, interviews observations, and discussions were used as tools for primary data collection. For secondary data, tools such as teacher lesson plans, records, and documents were utilized to obtain data.

Research Area

The Hanguranketha education zone has been selected as the research area for this study. This is located within the Hanguranketha Divisional Secretariat division in the Nuwara Eliya district of the Central Province of Sri Lanka. The research area was selected because it is one of the underdeveloped districts in Sri Lanka.

Research Population and Sampling

Out of 340 students from Grade 10 to Grade 13 across the 8 schools participating in the study, 181 students participated voluntarily. They were selected based on their attendance during the data collection period and their willingness to participate in the research. The stratified random sampling method was chosen. This method refers to dividing the total members of a population into sub-groups and selecting the samples required for the research from those divided sections. For this descriptive study, students, teachers, and principals from schools with classes from Grade 10 to Grade 13 in the Hanguranketha education zone were identified, and stratified random samples were selected using the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) table.

Data Analysis

Data analysis has been performed using both primary and secondary data. Accordingly, the qualitative data representing the social status of the collected data will be analyzed using simple descriptive statistical methods. Furthermore, explanations have been provided through tables and charts where necessary. Software such as SPSS and Microsoft Excel have been used as media for the analysis.

Data and Data Analysis

Ability to Obtain Sufficient Food for Three Meals in Students' Families

In order to identify the impacts of the increased cost of living on the behavior and health of students, it is highly appropriate to understand the ability to obtain sufficient food for three meals in the students' families. Therefore, Table 6.1 shows the details prepared according to the responses provided by students to the question asked to understand the ability to obtain sufficient food for three meals in the students' families.

Table 6.1: Ability to Obtain Sufficient Food for Three Meals in Students' Families

Response	Number (Percentage)
Regularly	131 (72.38%)
Sometimes	39 (21.55%)
Rarely	11 (6.08%)

As shown in the above table, it can be observed that 131 (72.38%) students responded that they are regularly able to obtain sufficient food for three meals in the family. Additionally, 39 (21.55%) students stated they can obtain it sometimes, and only 11 (6.08%) students reported that they are rarely able to obtain sufficient food for three meals in the family.

Ability to Obtain Nutritious Food in Students' Homes

To identify the impact that the increased cost of living has on the behavior and health of students, it is necessary to understand the inability to obtain nutritious food in students' homes. Therefore, Figure 6.2 shows the details compiled based on the responses provided by students to the question asked to understand the inability to obtain nutritious food at home.

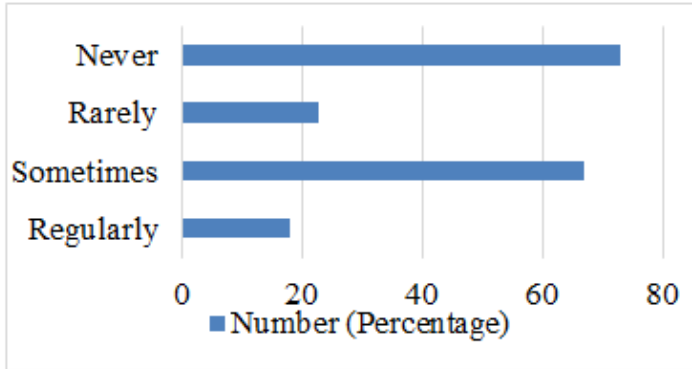


Figure 6.2: Inability to Obtain Nutritious Food in Students' Homes

As shown in Table 4.8 and Figure 4.5 above, 18 (9.94%) students responded that they are **regularly** in a situation where they cannot obtain nutritious food at home, 67 (37.02%) students **sometimes**, 23 (12.71%) students **rarely**, and 73 (40.33%) students responded that they are **never** in a situation where they cannot obtain nutritious food at home it is observed that they responded that there is never a situation where they are unable [to obtain nutritious food].

Due to the increased cost of living, prices of nutritious food items have risen, resulting in 68 students (37.72%) stating they are unable to obtain them in sufficient quantities. Additionally, 49 students (27.19%) reported that they consume nutritious food only once a week, 46 students (25.44%) stated that their intake of nutritious food has been reduced, and 22 students (12.28%) mentioned they are able to obtain nutritious food only once a day. Furthermore, 5 students (2.63%) responded that it has been several months since they last had eggs and milk, while 73 students (40.15%) stated that there have been no changes.

Impact of Students' Family Economic Status on Learning

To identify the impacts of the current increased cost of living on the economic status of students' families and their learning, it is necessary to understand their monthly family income. In this regard, factors such as the students' monthly family income, the poverty status of the family, the total monthly expenditure on education within the family, the monthly amount spent on students' education and related transportation, the students' contribution to increasing family income, and parental job losses due to the increased cost of living can be seen to exert an influence. Accordingly, the details regarding the monthly family income of students are clarified in Table 6.3 below

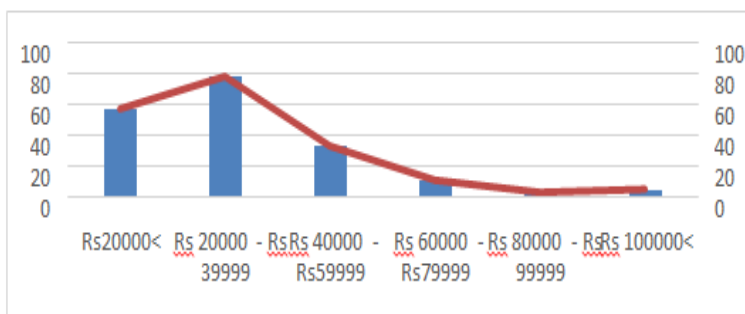


Figure 6.3: Monthly Family Income

Impacts on Students' School Transportation

To identify the impacts on students' school transportation caused by the increased cost of living, it is necessary to examine the distance between the students' homes and their schools. In this regard, factors such as the distance between school and home, the primary mode of transport used by students, instances of students arriving late to school due to transportation issues, and transportation being a barrier to consistent attendance at school and private tuition classes all exert an influence. Supporting Figure 6.4 present details regarding the primary mode of transport students use to attend school, which is one of the key factors influencing school transportation.

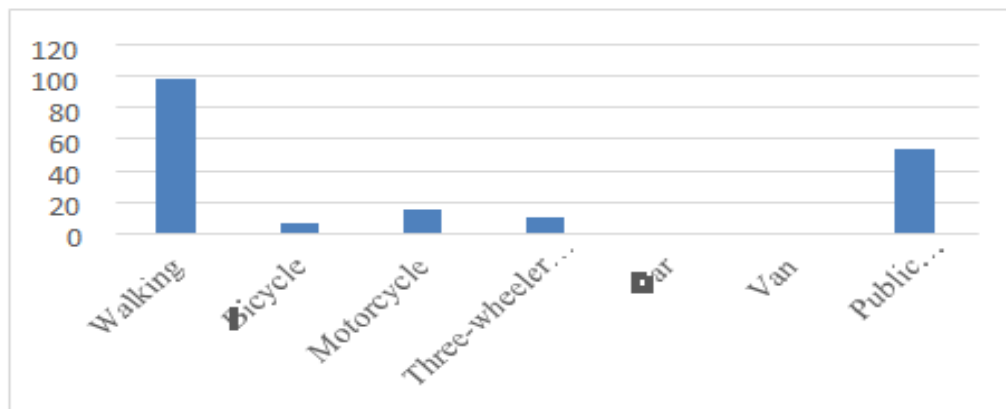


Figure 6.4: Mode of Transportation Used by Most Students to Come to School

It can be observed that a majority of students, 53 (29.28%) use public transportation, and 98 (54.14%) come by walking. Furthermore, some students use motorbikes 14 (7.73%), threewheelers 10 (5.52%), and bicycles 6 (3.31%) to come to school. It is also notable that not a single student comes to school in a car or van.

Transportation Means Posing a Barrier to Consistent Attendance at

School/Private Tuition Classes

To identify the impacts on students' school transportation due to the increased cost of living, it is necessary to analyze whether transportation means act as a barrier to consistent attendance at school/private tuition classes. In this regard, Table 6.5 show the details obtained based on the answers provided by students to question number 42 asked through the student questionnaire.

Table 6.5: Transportation Means as a Barrier to Consistent Attendance at School/Private Tuition Classes

Response	Number
Yes	68 (37.57%)
No	113 (62.43%)
Total	181

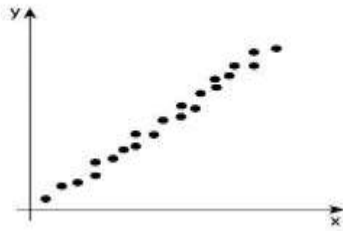
A majority of students, 113 (62.43%), responded that transportation is not a barrier to consistently attending school or private tuition classes, while 68 (37.57%) students responded that transportation does act as a barrier.

Correlation between Variables in the Study

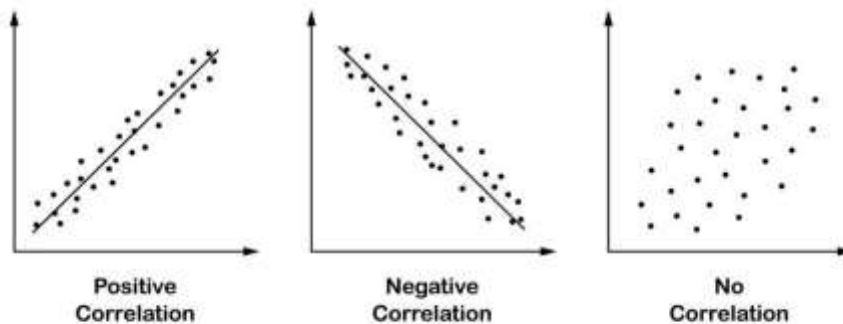
Significant relationships were identified between various variables in the statistical analysis conducted to confirm the impact of the increased cost of living on students' learning. Specifically, a **positive correlation of**

$+\$0.65$ is observed between monthly family income and the nutritional level of students. This scientifically confirms that when income decreases, the regular eating habits of students are affected.

High Degree of Positive Correlation



At the same time, a **strong negative correlation of $-\$0.72$** exists between the increase in the cost of living and the ability of students to purchase educational equipment. This value clarifies that the rise in the price of goods has directly reduced students' learning resources. Furthermore, the increase in transportation costs has a **moderate negative correlation of $\$0.58$** with students' school attendance. This reveals that the economic crisis has reduced the attendance rate of students.



However, only a very low correlation value of $+\$0.12$ is found between family income and private education (tuition) expenses. This value reveals the social reality that regardless of the parents' income level, they allocate funds for their children's additional classes either by taking loans or by reducing other essential expenses. Overall, these statistical values serve as evidence confirming the significant impact that the rising cost of living has created on the educational environment of students.

Research Findings

1. A majority of students, 131 (72.38%), regularly receive sufficient food for three meals. It was found in this study that family income is not necessarily linked to the regular acquisition of food for three meals.
2. It must be considered that the impact on obtaining nutritious food can cause long-term physical health issues. The research findings of Brown, Beardslee & Prothrow-Stith (2008) stated that poor nutrition makes students susceptible to illness—specifically leading to headaches and stomach aches. However, a majority of students (53.5%, $n=61$) in this study reported that they have not been affected by fever, headaches, or physical ailments.
3. A correlation exists between the inability to obtain nutritious food and family income. When family income increases, the inability to obtain nutritious food due to the increased cost of living decreases. That is, the impact is higher when family income decreases.

4. This study identified a direct correlation between family income and the amount spent on a student's education. As the amount decreases, the quality [of resources] decreases. Since the families of most students in this research population are below the poverty line, it can impact the amount spent on education.
5. 53% of students indicated that they spend more than Rs. 5,000 monthly for their education. Given the current increased cost of living, this could place a heavy burden on the students' families.
6. A situation has arisen where a significant number of students from Grades 10 to 13 have to contribute to increasing family income. 48.25% of students reported that they regularly contribute to increasing family income in some way.
7. A high number of students (approximately 29.28%) come to school via public transportation. Next to that, students who come by walking are found in large numbers (approximately 54.14%). Most teachers noted that because students walk long distances to school, they occasionally exhibit a lack of interest in learning during those times. Additionally, 25.44% (n=29) of students reported being unable to reach school on time when coming by bicycle, and 15.79% (n=18) mentioned that physical fatigue reduces their level of concentration during learning.
8. For a majority of students, their economic status acts as a barrier to obtaining learning inputs and equipment such as footwear, school bags, textbooks, stationery, photocopying services, smartphones, and internet facilities. In this study, students are facing difficulties due to these economic issues in the following areas:
 - a. **Footwear and school bags:** 20 students (11.05%)
 - b. **Textbooks:** 21 students (11.60%)
 - c. **Stationery:** 8 students (4.42%)
 - d. **Photocopies:** 16 students (8.84%)
 - e. **Smartphones:** 12 students (6.63%)
 - f. **Internet facilities:** 15 students (8.29%)
9. A majority of principals (n=3, 60%) stated that online learning cannot be continued due to power outages and that students are unable to learn in a healthy manner in classrooms because of the lack of adequate lighting and ventilation. Through this, it can be observed that students have to face many inconveniences during their learning time.
10. Along with the students' learning activities, the teaching activities of the school play a vital role in their educational achievements. Schools usually conduct extra training classes, discussions, and seminars in addition to regular classes. A majority of school principals (n=3, 37.5%) stated that the shortage of paper is a major challenge and barrier to conducting these extra training sessions, seminars, and subject discussions. They further mentioned that due to financial inflation for these learning and teaching inputs, a situation has arisen where they are unable to purchase a sufficient quantity of materials. This is likely to create an impact on the learning of advanced-level students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Avoiding power outages as much as possible and completely avoiding them during school hours. Furthermore, in instances where power cuts must be implemented, opportunities should be created for the majority of a school's students to participate in online learning without interruption by implementing cuts based on school zones.

2. Reducing the impact on students' learning caused by the increased cost of living as much as possible by reducing public transportation fares used by the majority of students from Grade 10 to Grade 13 for educational travel.
3. Addressing the paper shortage as much as possible, while also implementing and monitoring price controls for school equipment.
4. Distance creates an impact on students' transportation. Therefore, facilities should be established in regional schools to ensure that advanced-level education is accessible to students in all areas.
5. Providing facilities such as financial aid to schools to conduct extra classes as an alternative to private tuition.
6. Allocating funds to schools to provide necessary learning equipment to students free of charge.
7. Distributing school learning equipment and learning guides to students for free.
8. Providing extra classes in schools that are equivalent to private tuition classes.
9. Paying special attention at the home level to students who arrive late or have irregular school attendance due to the increased cost of living, and making efforts to help those students focus on their learning.
10. Taking steps to avoid spending funds unnecessarily and instead investing in students' basic needs and learning.
11. Avoiding new buildings, entrance gates, and decorative works during activities related to the School Development Society, especially during the current crisis. contributing and providing advice on prioritizing the most essential support for students' learning in [current] circumstances.

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