

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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## ENSURING TEACHING AND LEARNING AMIDST THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN SRI LANKA

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### Abstract

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has significantly impacted the country's education system, with schools facing challenges in maintaining regular operations and providing quality education to students. This study examined the strategies employed by school principals to ensure teaching and learning amid the crisis. Twelve school principals were interviewed, representing 7 Sinhala medium and 5 Tamil medium schools. The findings highlighted the following challenges schools face: low attendance of students and teachers, learning loss, disruption of remote learning activities, malnutrition among students and psychological issues among students, teachers, and parents. Despite these challenges, the study found that school principals worked hard to ensure that teaching and learning continued during the economic crisis. They had implemented several strategies to address their challenges, including flexible attendance policies, temporary accommodation for teachers who travel far from school, and sharing meals with poor students. The study concludes that school principals have played a critical role in ensuring that teaching and learning continued during the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Their strategies have helped mitigate the crisis's impact on students and teachers, but more support is needed from the government. The study recommends that the government should consider to provide the following support to schools: increasing public transport at low cost for the students and teachers for regular attendance; resuming Nutrition support for students; increasing salaries for teachers; Strengthening remote learning initiatives by reducing the price of digital devices and expanding internet access; providing psychological support for students and teachers; and prioritization of timely; and Long-term planning to build resilience in the education system. By implementing these recommendations, the government can help ensure that the education system in Sri Lanka can withstand future economic shocks.

**Keywords:** Economic Crisis, School education, School principals, Sri Lanka



## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic originated in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and rapidly spread globally, including Sri Lanka. The country experienced multiple lockdowns throughout 2020, leading to school closures and education disruptions. By 2021, most of the population had been vaccinated and normalcy was returning to all sectors, including education. However, an economic crisis arose due to government mismanagement of finances unrelated to COVID-19. The term economic crisis is used to describe a wide range of situations in which financial institutions or assets experience a sudden and significant decrease in value (Shibly, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Sri Lanka has faced its worst economic crisis, which has had a devastating impact on its citizens (Subhash, 2022)<sup>2</sup>. According to George et al. (2022)<sup>3</sup>, the economic crisis in Sri Lanka from 2019 to 2022 was caused by a combination of factors, including economic mismanagement, a rise in foreign debt, diminishing foreign reserves, currency depreciation, and rising prices. Other factors that contributed to the crisis include the Easter bomb attacks in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic crisis caused power cuts, shortages of necessities such as fuel and food leading to nationwide protests. The shortage of supplies forced schools to close, and people were urged to work from home to conserve resources (Perera, 2022)<sup>4</sup>. According to Tripathi et al. (2022)<sup>5</sup> and Waghmode (2022)<sup>6</sup>, the long-standing financial crisis in Sri Lanka has significantly impacted the country's citizens, leading to shortages of food, basic medical supplies, and fuel. The country's \$51 billion in external obligations has also led to the downgrading of 13 Sri Lankan banks. In 2021, the Sri Lankan government banned importing chemical fertilizers, resulting in protests by many farmers and disruptions in school transport. Schools had to be closed several times due to protests by school principals and teachers' unions (Tripathi et al., 2022)<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the government's mismanagement of funds has resulted in a decline in the country's foreign exchange reserves, making it difficult to import essential goods, including petroleum products. It has created obstacles to the smooth operation of school education activities, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. The economic crisis has also affected the education system, with schools postponing exams indefinitely due to a nationwide paper shortage caused by a lack of foreign currency. The crisis has also affected remote learning activities due to frequent power outages, negatively impacting students' physical and mental health. During a crisis, conducting schools becomes challenging, and school principals are under immense pressure to ensure that school education continues for the children. Therefore, Wijerathne (2023)<sup>7</sup> opined that the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka, a nation of 22 million people, poses a significant threat to the country's acclaimed, free education system. This system, previously recognized for achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for education and hailed as a success story since gaining independence, is now facing challenges. In this context, it is crucial to examine how school principals responded to ensure teaching and learning during the Economic Crisis in the country. The study aimed to examine the school principals' responses to ensure teaching and learning amid the economic crisis. The following research question guided the study:

- What strategies are employed by School Principals to ensure the teaching and learning among school children during the crisis period in Sri Lanka?

In answering the question, the study will provide insights into effective strategies that can be employed during a crisis in the education sector.

## Methodology

A qualitative research approach and a case study research design were employed to identify the strategies employed by school principals in ensuring school education during the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Twelve school principals were selected for the study interview using purposive sampling, representing 7 Sinhala medium and 5 Tamil medium schools. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted for approximately 40 minutes each. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing app, and the data was transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the collected data. Based on the common themes observed in the data, they were categorized, and conclusions were drawn. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study sample. The sample of twelve school principals included five from national schools, three from 1AB schools, two from 1C schools, and one each from type 2 and type 3 schools. The sample also included six principals from urban areas, four from rural areas, and two from estate areas, representing six districts of the country.

Table 1  
*Sample Representation*

School	Type	Province	District	Zone	Nature	Medium	Location
01	Type-2	Western	Colombo	Homagama	Mixed	Sinhala	Rural
02	1AB	Western	Colombo	Colombo	Mixed	Sinhala	Urban
03	1C	Eastern	Ampara	Kalmunai	Mixed	Tamil	Rural
04	National	Western	Colombo	Colombo	Girls	Trilingual	Urban
05	National	Central	Nuwara Eliya	Hatton	Mixed	Tamil	Estate
06	1AB	Central	Kandy	Wattegama	Mixed	Tamil & English	Urban
07	1C	Central	Nuwara Eliya	Nuwara Eliya	Mixed	Tamil	Estate
08	National	Western	Colombo	Colombo	Boys	Tamil & English	Urban
09	Type 3	Southern	Galle	Elpitiya	Mixed	Sinhala	Rural
10	National	Western	Gampaha	Minuwangoda	Boys	Sinhala & English	Urban
11	1AB	Western	Colombo	Colombo	Girls	Sinhala & English	Urban
12	National	Southern	Hambantota	Hambantota	Mixed	Sinhala & English	Rural

## Attendance of Students:

The economic crisis has made it difficult for schools to operate normally. Efforts have been made to resume student learning and teaching activities, including opening schools a few days a week. However, student attendance has been low. All the principals in this study agreed that the number of students coming to their schools had decreased. Despite lower overall student attendance in

rural and estate sector schools, a number of students continued to attend classes by walking or cycling. For instance, the following statements confirm the situation of student attendance in rural and estate sector schools:

Principal 3: *"My school is rural, and most of our students walk or use bicycles to come to school. Despite the economic crisis, my school's overall number of students has not been affected. However, during these tough times, we have noticed a slight decrease in student attendance compared to regular days."*

Principal 5: *"I work at an Estate sector school. It is a mixed school, and many of our students walk to school. The economic crisis has not caused a decrease in overall attendance. However, we have observed that many female students who usually take three-wheelers to commute face difficulties due to the ongoing fuel crisis, leading to their absence from school."*

However, urban school principals noted a more acute problem in urban schools. Many urban students could not attend school as private and public transportation was disrupted due to the fuel shortage. Moreover, some principals mentioned that students were affected because they had to stand in long queues to buy gas and fuel, especially Kerosene oil, for their homes. A principal from an urban school confirmed this issue:

Principal 11: *"My school is in Colombo, an urban Girls' school. Many female students rely on public transportation, including buses and trains. Some students also use three-wheelers and school van services to come to school. Unfortunately, due to the economic crisis affecting the country, we have experienced a notable decline in attendance among these students who depend on various transportation services."*

Similar responses were received from all Tamil and Sinhala principals.

In addition, the principals were asked about strategies to improve student attendance. Many school principals mentioned that they had become more flexible with students' daily attendance. For example:

- One principal explained: *"My school used to require students to arrive before 7:30 am. However, we have become more flexible with the morning timing because of the country's economic crisis and transportation problems. Latecomers were allowed into classes without any punishments. We have also relaxed rules about school uniforms and shoes. These changes have helped increase student attendance to some extent."*

- Another principal shared: *"My school is urban outside Colombo. The number of students in my school is low too. We have relaxed strict rules about when students need to arrive. Also, since the government made school days three days a week, we have noticed more students coming."*

Recent studies have reinforced the views of school principals, finding that low school attendance is a major contributing factor to learning loss among students. Leanage and Saito (2023)<sup>8</sup> also found that the closure of schools during the crisis has resulted in learning loss for children. A survey conducted by UNICEF (2022)<sup>9</sup> found that the economic crisis in Sri Lanka has significantly impacted education. According to the survey, 56% of households had at least one school-going child of age 19 years or younger, and almost 60% of households with schooling children reported that their child had missed school at least once due to lack of fuel or transport since March 2022. 17% of households with children missed school most days of the week or could

not attend school for more than two weeks at a time. 31% of parents indicated that they did not think their child's school had taken adequate steps to compensate for lost learning. It further found that costs for the stationary, school materials, transportation, etc., were reported as the primary challenges to ensuring their child's school attendance (UNICEF 2022)<sup>9</sup>.

### **Attendance of Teachers:**

Another challenge faced in providing school education during Sri Lanka's economic crisis is teachers' attendance. Most teachers use public transport or motorcycles, and many travel together in three-wheelers. Teachers from many schools travel a long distance to reach the schools. Because of the economic crisis, especially due to fuel shortage, transportation services were severely affected. It meant teachers who had to travel far to school daily spent huge amounts of money from their monthly income.

Moreover, teachers who use motorcycles and three-wheelers are reluctant to use their motorcycles and three-wheelers. Therefore, the government temporarily requested teachers to work in schools near their homes, but many schools still had low teacher attendance. An urban school principal shared: - "In my school, many female teachers travel from quite far away. They used to come by public transport or hire three-wheelers. Because of the economic crisis in the country, transportation has become difficult or more expensive. It has made it challenging for teachers to come to school."

Similarly, another urban principal said: "*Many teachers in my school come from far places and face transportation problems. It makes it hard for them to come to school.* We heard similar answers from all principals, no matter the school's type or medium and location. Principals were asked how they were addressing the issue of low teacher attendance. They mentioned that, similar to the flexibility given to students, they were also being flexible with teachers. One urban principal explained that they had set up temporary accommodation close to the school, with the help of parents, to make it easier for teachers to stay and teach. This led to more teachers coming and staying closed to the school. Similar strategies were observed among rural school principals. One principal mentioned:

- "*Even though our school is rural, many teachers come from nearby urban places. So, we asked the community to provide temporary places for teachers to stay in our village. This helped ensure that teachers from far away could stay and teach in our school.*"

### **Nutrition Levels of School Children in Economic Crisis**

The nutritional well-being of students is of immense importance for their whole balance development and academic performance. Proper nutrition provides a solid foundation for various aspects of a student's life, influencing their physical health, cognitive abilities, and emotional and social well-being. The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has badly affected the nutritional levels of school children. According to Leanage and Saito (2023)<sup>8</sup>, the crisis has affected households' ability to afford daily nutritious food, leading to an increased risk of children dropping out of school. Due to the economic crisis, many industries were closed for various reasons, such as fuel shortages and restrictions on the import of raw materials. According to this situation, a considerable number of parents lost their employment. Due to these reasons, parents face the challenge of providing nutritional meals for their children. Similarly, a survey conducted by Save the Children found that

one out of five families is unable to meet their minimum food needs and children from one in three families have reduced how much food they eat each day (Groundviews 2022).<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the government's budget cuts have impacted free school meal programmes, leaving socio-economically disadvantaged households struggling to provide sufficient food for their children. Therefore, the principals in this study asked questions related to the student's nutrition. Almost all participants of this study have agreed that the nutrition levels of school children have declined significantly due to the country's economic crisis.

*"Most of the parents of my school students are daily wage earners, and they do not have permanent income," said one principal. "Due to the economic crisis, many people have lost their jobs and food prices have skyrocketed. As a result, many children are not getting enough to eat. A considerable number of children coming to school without having morning breakfast."*

Another principal said he had seen more children fainting during school hours due to hunger. *"This is a serious problem," he said. "Children who are not getting enough to eat cannot learn effectively. During the lesson hours, students got to sleep."*

The principals interviewed for this survey said they are taking several steps to address the problem of child malnutrition. These include:

- Encouraging children who bring food to share it with other hungry children.
- Providing food to needy children from a "food box" in the school. This "food box" concept was implemented with support from school teachers and wealthy students.
- Some teachers gave their own meals to needy children in their classrooms.
- Receiving occasional help from the school community to provide food to students.

In addition, School children and parents were guided by teachers and principals to take enough of the freely available fruits in their home surroundings.

The principals said they are concerned about the long-term effects of child malnutrition on the country's education system. "If we do not address this problem, we will see a decline in the educational attainment of our children," said one principal. These findings highlight the need for urgent action to address the problem of child malnutrition in Sri Lanka. The government, the private sector, and civil society must all work together to ensure that all children have access to the food they need to grow and learn.

### **Remote Learning Activities**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governmental and non-governmental organizations implemented various remote learning activities to assist students affected by the abrupt closure of schools in Sri Lanka. In collaboration with the National Institute of Education, the Ministry of Education introduced two television programs, *Gurugedera* and *Gurukulam*, in partnership with the state TV network Rupavahini. Educational content was also broadcast on Channel Eye and *Nethra* TV channels. The Ministry's e-learning portal, E-chakalaka, also provided study materials for students across grades one to twelve (UNESCO, 2020; Nawastheen & Perera, 2021; Nawastheen et al., 2022)<sup>11,12,13</sup>.

Schools in Sri Lanka saw some improvement in remote learning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the economic crisis in Sri Lanka has created uncertainty in school education and remote learning activities. The economic crisis has caused problems in the country,

such as frequent power outages, rising food and livelihood costs, disruptions to internet services, sharp increases in the price of digital devices, increased charges for internet services and telephone bills, and increased poverty. This has caused a significant setback to remote learning activities that had already made progress. Leanage and Saito (2023)<sup>8</sup> found that power outages and the high cost of internet connectivity made it difficult for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to access resources and participate in online learning. This hindered their ability to learn effectively. Principals who participated in this interview said that teachers in their schools promoted remote learning activities for students through various media during COVID-19. However, the remote learning activities were affected by the subsequent economic crisis that affected all people in the country.

*"During the COVID-19 period, my school teachers used to deliver learning activities to students through social media platforms like Zoom and WhatsApp by spending their own money. However, the current crisis has also affected teachers. Due to frequent power outages, rising costs of digital devices, lack of internet access, and other factors, remote learning activities cannot be conducted as before. However, we try to do remote learning activities for students as much as possible," said a principal*".

### **Psychological issues**

Interviews with school principals revealed that the economic crisis in Sri Lanka has caused significant psychological distress among students, teachers, and parents. Reduced purchasing power, uncertainty about the future, postponement of the GCE O/L and A/L examinations, poor salaries of teachers and academic staff, high transportation costs, and exorbitant food prices have all contributed to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among these groups.

Principals emphasized that the loss of learning and the postponement of major exams contribute to students' psychological distress. During the economic crisis, schools were frequently closed. Due to this school closure, students were expected to stay home without their parents' or guardians' adequate support and supervision for their learning activities. This situation also psychologically affected students and parents. According to Groundviews (2022)<sup>10</sup>, children were experiencing increased stress and anxiety and were more likely to be involved in child labour due to the economic crisis in the country. Interviewed school principals also expressed similar concerns about the psychological well-being of students.

The following are some of the concerns expressed by the principals:

*"The school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have already set back student educational attainment. This economic crisis has exacerbated the problem. Students are lacking confidence in their learning."*

*"My school serves primary-level students from Grades 1 to 5. Most grade one students were admitted without proper pre-school education. Due to this reason, these students needed to be fully acquired pre-entry competencies. Also, they need to develop essential competencies at school, but these still need to be fully acquired due to the continuous disruption of school education. I am concerned about how this will affect their future."*

*"The learning loss among primary-level students will affect their future academic attainment. Although parents are concerned about this, most low-income earners cannot do anything."*

*"The postponement of school terms and exams has created fear among GCE (O/L) and (A/L) students about their uncertain future. There is concern that these students may drop out of school."*

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"Postponing school terms and exams will only prolong the problem. It is, therefore, appropriate to complete the school terms and examinations on time without delay."

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka has significantly impacted the country's education system, with schools facing challenges in maintaining regular operations and providing quality education to students. This study examined the strategies employed by school principals to ensure teaching and learning amid the crisis. The study's findings highlighted the following challenges schools face: low attendance of students and teachers, disruption of remote learning activities, malnutrition among students and psychological issues among students, teachers, and parents. Despite these challenges, the study found that school principals worked hard to ensure that teaching and learning continued during the economic crisis. They had implemented several strategies to address their challenges, including flexible attendance policies, Temporary accommodation for teachers who travel far from school, and Food boxes for poor students. The study recommends that the government provide the following support to schools by the government and relevant authorities:

- Providing financial assistance to schools to help them cover the costs of transportation, food, and other essential items for students and teachers.
- Resuming and expanding nutrition support for students
- Improving the availability of digital devices and internet access in schools so that students can continue learning even when they cannot attend school in person.
- Providing psychological support to students, teachers, and parents struggling to cope with the stress of the economic crisis.
- Conducting general examinations on time without postponing them.
- Developing a long-term plan to build resilience in the education system so that it is better prepared to withstand future economic shocks.

By implementing these recommendations, the government can help to ensure that the education system in Sri Lanka can withstand future economic shocks. Similarly, UNICEF (2022)<sup>9</sup> also highlighted in their survey the urgent need to address the impact of the economic crisis on education in Sri Lanka. The government and other stakeholders need to ensure that all children have access to quality education, regardless of their family's income or location. This study focused only on the strategies used by the school principal during the economic crisis. It employed a qualitative study approach. Further research is needed to address various issues of education caused by the economic crisis using different research approaches, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, with teachers, students, and school communities.

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