

## **Dilemma of State Schools in Sri Lanka: How School Type Creates Inequality in Academic Achievement**

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### **Abstract**

State schools in Sri Lanka are categorized into four types based on the grades and subjects offered at the General Certificate of Education – Advanced/Level (G.C.E. A/L). This categorization appears to be providing equity in educational access as there are fair policies to enroll students into any type of school. Unfortunately, there are many other hidden contributing factors which shatter these fair policies concerning equity in school access. Moreover, various studies have shown that student achievement levels can be easily determined by the type of school they attend. This study was done using data collected by the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC) in collaboration with the World Bank and the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Sri Lanka in 2012 on factors affecting educational achievement of students completing grade 8. For this study, such data were extracted by creating parameters for social capital, human capital and financial capital. Each capital was correlated with the marks for science, mathematics and English to ascertain whether any relationship between capital and achievement exists. It was found from the study that rather than improving home and school social capital, improving home and school financial and human capital can heighten academic achievements.

*Keywords:* School type, capital, educational achievement

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## **Introduction**

There are many disparities in educational achievement of students in Sri Lanka due to disparities at home, school and student background characteristics. According to Farrel (1999), 'equal opportunities' are three fold; (1) equality of access- ensuring that people have the same opportunities as are available to others (2) equality of outcomes – an attempt to ensure that a particular group reaches levels of achievement equal to another group (3) equivalent experience – enabling each person to fulfil their potential. However, many findings show that the Sri Lankan education system does not provide students with equal educational opportunities in terms of access, outcomes and experience. The government schools in Sri Lanka are classified into four types, namely, Type 1AB, Type 1C, Type 2 and Type 3 which cater to the demands of the students who want to prepare for various examinations under various subject streams. While Type 1AB and Type 1C provide education from primary level to the Advanced Level, Type 2 and Type 3 schools provide education from primary level to only grade 11. This categorization was introduced assuming the fact that this will eventually enable the available resources to be distributed equally among students. However, Type 1AB schools producing the best results in Sri Lanka followed by Type 1C, Type 3 and Type 2 is a widely known fact. Research reports of NEREC from 2003 to 2016 and the World Bank in 2016 provide evidence in this regard. This is in addition to the individual studies conducted by various educationists as well (Gunawardhana, 2010, Jayaweera, 1986).

Type 1AB schools attract the best students in the country by enrolling students on a merit basis. Even the seemingly fair method of enrolling students to grade 1 within a 2 km radius provides a better opportunity for financially stable parents, as the neighborhoods surrounding 1AB schools have economically stable communities. Further, the MoE directly funds Type 1AB schools by providing more financial support than it provides to other types of schools which are funded by Provincial Councils. This has created more demand for Type 1AB schools in Sri Lanka. This high demand has allowed many malpractices in the enrollment of students to various 1AB schools. On the other hand, the students who are eligible to pursue Advanced Level studies, but are unable to enter a Type 1AB school, are left with the only option of being enrolled into Type 1C schools which provide only Commerce and Arts stream education. This is an unfortunate situation as these students will not be able to study science or mathematics for the G.C.E. A/L examination even if they have are qualified to do so.

Considering the above anomaly, this study looked at differences in educational achievement of secondary level students in three types of schools, Type 1AB, Type 1C and Type 2. Financial capital, human capital and social capital both at home and school are considered as inputs for educational achievements of students. The main objective of the study thus was to look at the factors affecting achievement to determine the degree of influence by the school type. By using two models, namely, the school type effect model and the non-school

type effect model, the study will present how achievement is determined. The study will further present how school and home inputs effect achievement and then determine whether the addition of the school type into the model changes the chronological order of these inputs changing the achievement levels of education. The study proposes the changes to be done in relation to financial capital, human capital and social capital to provide equity at national level.

## Literature review

### Social capital

One of the most prominent developments in the social sciences during the last decade is the rise of interest in social capital as a means of understanding effects of socio-economic factors in education. According to Putnam (2000), the concept of social capital has been discussed at least six times in the past by major researchers and thinkers. It was discussed by Canadian sociologists in the 1950s, by urbanist Jane Jacobs in the 1960s, by economist Glen Loury in the 1970s and by three other people - French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, German economist Ekkehart Schlicht, and James Samuel Coleman in the 1980s. But the origin of the idea of social capital can be traced as far back as 1916, and the comment of L.J. Hanifan, a state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia (Putnam 2000). Coleman and Hoffer (1987), by their longitudinal study, shed light on the impact of social capital on the achievements in mathematics and verbal skills of students of catholic and private schools in America. They showed that family social capital attributes were significant in relation to the high academic achievement and lower drop-out rates in Catholic schools in comparison to non-Catholic and private schools in the country. Coleman (1998) and Parcel and Dufur (2001) also suggest that spending time with parents not only enhances the human capital and social capital of a child as but also it gives positive educational outcomes.

Zhou and Bankston (1998) in a study of Vietnamese children in New Orleans found that Chinatown stimulates academic success of the ethnic minority children by facilitating them to play an active role in preserving their traditional ethnic values. By preserving their traditional values, they maintain the literacy of their native language which eventually helps them to have better academic achievements. Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) found that bilingual students were more likely to obtain the necessary forms of institutional support to advance their school performance and their life chances. Putnam (2000) also mentioned that social capital is a significant factor in child development. According to his book *Bowling Alone*, he argues that states that have a high social capital have a high education performance. In these states, parents are more associated with their children's education. The teachers have claimed that when parents participate in their children's education and the school, the children tend to behave well at school, reduce the risk of those bringing weapons to the school, lower them being physically aggressive and generally lower the levels

of them being apathetic about education. Croll's (2004) findings show families are important to young people as a source of identity and security and also in gaining favorable educational outcomes. It was found out that socio-economic status makes a difference to young people educationally, but more interestingly what parents do inside the family, such as communication and monitoring homework and social interactions outside the family have shown a marked difference in the educational outcomes of the young people. Teachman et al. (1996) who used Coleman's family structure by further developing it to family types (single parent, never married and other) found the contribution of social capital in single parent families. They also contributed to the literature by measuring parent-child interactions by the indicators of how often children discuss school related matters with their parents, and have suggested that children who often talk about school related matters with their parents achieve better academic results than the others.

Crosnoe (2008) in his study on social capital says that most studies on social capital and student achievement have isolated family and school as separate institutions providing social capital for children's academic achievement, but not as a combination providing a plethora of social capital. Hence, they agree with theories of family and school as the primary providers of social capital in a child's life and have looked into both of these institutions in a combined format, presenting an ecological context between the two. The findings of this study conclude that though the emotional distance between parents and an adolescent adversely affect the academic achievement and various aspects of social capital in school tend to increase students' academic achievement. It says students did well in schools where the student-teacher bond is high. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) in their study of Mexican American high school students' say that student grades and educational and occupational expectations are related to institutional agents such as teachers and guidance counsellors. The research provides evidence to support a positive relationship between social capital with grades and social expectations. Haghghat's (2005) study on academic performance and family and school social capital indicates that school ambience has a significant and positive effect on mathematics and reading, and school outreach a positive effect on mathematics but not on reading. Further, it was mentioned that schools with positive teaching and learning ambience and positive professional relationships between teachers and administrators encourage a supportive learning environment for their pupils. Croninger and Lee (2001) seeing teachers as sources of social capital, suggest that teachers are a major source as providers of social capital in schools.

### Human capital

Home human capital in a family influences the "...knowledge, skills, values, and habits of their children" (Becker, 1993, p.21). Becker says human capital in a family is crucial to the developments of a country. He argues that the labour market cannot sustain school drop-outs, and governments fail to devise policies to help these children, as the lack of preparation of families when they were young, multiplies over time when they become

teenagers. Therefore, a family's investment in time to foster learning attitudes and habits in children are human capital investments that develop cognitive abilities of children which in turn benefit them and the country in the future. The OECD (1998) report on Human Capital Investment says that families make investments that directly or indirectly influence the human capital of their children. This investment should not only be monetary, but it needs to be the human capital investments made by parents on their children. With the ideas of the importance of human capital on academic achievements there have sprung many studies that have looked at human capital in relation to academic achievement. Until quite recently, family human capital has been measured by parental education, parental occupation, the amount of time parents spend on their children's academic work and parents' expectations of their children. But, later, in some studies health is also seen as a contribution to human capital.

A case study researching the effects of home human capital on primary school students of Madhya Pradesh in India presents findings that parental occupation and parental education are significantly correlated with educational achievement. It indicates that father's occupation and parents' education as a crucial determinant in academic achievement of their children; the performance of students whose fathers followed tertiary sector based occupations was much higher than the performance of students whose fathers followed primary sector based occupations; and the scores were systematically and positively associated with the level of fathers' education (Marjoribanks, 2004). Further, children achieve high results at school when their parents have high expectations of them even if the children are from poor financial backgrounds (Coleman, 1990; Marjoribanks, 2004). Consequently, human capital in parents works as a 'resource bundle' which children acquire by daily interactions and parental expectations. This enables the child not only to enhance the cognitive abilities, but also to adjust and blend into the society as human capital is one of the most prevalent forms in determining the social adjustment of a child (Parcel & Dufur, 2001).

Similar to the abilities and educational levels of parents, teachers show variations in qualifications and experiences. Schools with a higher proportion of teachers who have Masters' degrees have a stronger base of human capital upon which children can draw (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). Experienced and qualified teachers have a pool of human capital resources that can be utilized to promote cognitive abilities of students. But, Rivkin et al. (2005) oppose this idea. He says a master's degree does not make a difference as credentials do not matter in the teaching profession as these qualifications do not provide the necessary skills for teachers. Nevertheless, Berliner and Biddle (1995) state that teachers who have learned how to teach, should be better than the teachers who have followed formal study courses in pedagogy.

Hanushek (1994) found a significant relationship between teacher experience and student performance in 14 studies out of the 30 which he reviewed. This is a significant finding as

he has reviewed the highest-quality research in his study. He has thus stated that “experienced teachers are, on average, more effective at raising student performance than those in early years of their teaching” (p.22).

Therefore, students at schools that have more human capital have a greater opportunity than the others for realising their academic potential. Moreover, if they hail from homes where there is a high human capital, they seem to be doing better than their counterparts academically. Furthermore, a high social capital at home and at school contributes to their cognitive abilities. But, what is underpinning social capital and human capital is the financial capital. One cannot do away with financial capital even if there is satisfactory social and human capital.

### Financial capital

The relationship between family income and academic achievement had become obvious by the mid twentieth century. *Sexton's Education and Income; Inequalities of opportunity in Our Public Schools* (1961), Cloward and Piven (1974) and the race-based studies of Kenneth Clarke have highlighted the tendency for academic achievement to rise with the increase of family income. Financial capital at home is approximately measured by the family's wealth or income. It provides the physical resources that can aid achievement: a fixed place in the home for studying, materials to aid learning, the financial resources that smooth family problems (Coleman, 1988). As the associations between family financial capital and academic achievement were so prominent, in the mid twentieth century, more than one researcher had claimed that family financial capital is the best single predictor of academic achievement.

Although other recent researchers claim that there are many inputs to children's cognitive developments, family financial capital remains a prominent contributor for academic abilities. Evidence of the advantages of financially better off homes toward educational achievement can be found in the research studies conducted by Conley et al. (2004), Bowles and Gintis (1976), and Coleman (1990). Conley et al., 2004 have shown that family income has stronger associations with cognitive outcomes of young children. Children who live in persistent poverty achieve less academically compared with children who have never lived in poverty. This factor is evident even in studies where mother's education is controlled (Conley et al., 2004). There is a considerable literature on financial capital that shows a relationship between access to family financial capital and school achievement (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Coleman, 1990). Croll (2004) presents similar findings in a paper published on the theoretical and empirical studies related to the inter-generational transmission of social, economic and educational characteristics. This shows that the socio-economic status of a family does make a difference to young peoples' education.

On the other hand, the number of children in a family causes a dilution of family resources which shows effects upon cognitive abilities of a child similar to a child of a poor family. The ‘resource dilution’ caused by the increased number of children, negatively affects cognitive abilities of children of ‘big’ families (Blake, 1989; Coleman, 1990; Downey, 1995). The number of children and the total time and money spent on them by parents is negatively related and therefore, the children of ‘small’ families are academically better than the children who have many siblings (Becker, 1993). The reason for this is clear as more children enforce an additional spending of money and time on parents. The academic benefit for a child in a small family is evident in Becker’s notion of “emperor child” in China; the Chinese families are encouraged, or rather forced to have only one child by imposing taxes on large families. This is beneficial for the child in terms of education as the parents are able to give lavish toys and presents and to push their child toward better educational achievements. Other empirical evidence also suggests that children from larger families have lower levels of verbal development, less favorable home environments, and higher levels of behaviour problems (Parcel & Menaghan, 1994). Consequently, children of wealthy families with a few children seem to be having a better chance of enhancing their cognitive abilities than their counterparts.

Initial studies on school capitals have argued that student-teacher ratios and teacher salaries are the determinants of school financial capital (Coleman, 1966). Recent research that has looked at school financial capital effects by measuring individual school characteristics or even classroom characteristics, suggest that school financial resources promote academic achievement (Greenwald et al., 1996; Hanushek, 1994). A study by Robitaille and Beaton (2002) supports this claim by showing that in Australia and in the Russian Federation financial capital at school enhances literacy levels in science, while in Iceland a positive result was found in relation to mathematics achievement. They also confirm that in Switzerland, students of financially better schools did well in both subjects; mathematics and science. This study, which has surveyed 16 countries, presents little variance in achievement in schools within countries, but a notable difference between countries due to variances in school characteristics.

Pettigrew (1967) reported that for less-advantaged children, quality of schooling appears to be the most influential. This may be the case as school provides them with more systematic learning which diminishes the shortcomings they face at home. Research evidence discussed below show that students of financially better schools are in an academically advantaged position. Those schools reduce the family financial disadvantage of the poor children by providing better educational prospects for them.

### **Research methodology**

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of home and school capital which would be helpful in policy planning. Background data collected from the NEREC 2012

study was used for this study (NEREC, 2013). NEREC has categorized the nine provinces of Sri Lanka according to academic achievement levels of grade 8 students. Academic achievement is measured by assessing marks for science, mathematics and English language for tests prepared by the NEREC.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To identify the most influencing factor for educational achievement of secondary level students in state schools in Sri Lanka.
2. To examine the impact of the type of school on educational achievement of secondary level students in state schools in Sri Lanka.
3. To analyze whether the influence of each capital changes when school type is added to the model

### **Sample**

Background data collected by the NEREC in 2012 was used for this study. Academic achievements of students in each province are categorized in chronological order in the NEREC study by clustering the highest-achieving provinces, mid-achieving provinces and least-achieving provinces (NEREC 2013). For this study, North Western Province from the highest performing group, Northern and Central Provinces from the middle performing group and Eastern Province from the least performing group were taken as the sample. Altogether 196 schools with 5433 students, 5433 parents, 588 teachers with a teacher of mathematics, a teacher of science and a teacher of English language from each school and 196 school principals were taken. However the achieved sample is less than the proposed sample with 5166 students and parents, 555 teachers, 185 principals in 185 schools. Background data was collected by questionnaires given to students, parents, teachers and principals. Principal component analysis and regression analysis was used to analyze data.

### **Discussion**

#### **Home capital**

Home financial capital, home human capital and home social capital shows a significant effect on achievement levels. Of the three capitals home financial capital seems to be the most influencing factor ( $B=4.71$ ,  $P=.000$ ) followed by human capital ( $B=4.20$ ,  $P=.000$ ). Social capital seems to be the least influencing factor ( $B=.82$ ,  $P=.000$ ). Yet, it does significantly influence educational achievement. Therefore, a household with more financial capital, human capital and social capital seems to be providing a conducive environment for its children educationally. On the other hand, taking financial capital into consideration, the facilities a child has in their home such as a separate place to study with a study table and chair, a book rack and also access to television, Internet, radio, books and magazines etc.



seems to be having a greater impact on their educational achievements. Further, the high monthly income as well as living in an urban area rather than rural or estate appears to influence high educational achievements. When considering human capital inputs, a child's time utilization for activities such as doing homework, learning in a private tuition class, self-studying with or without assistance from home members and having an undisturbed home environment are the predictors for high achievements. Parental education level and their expectation for their child's future appear to be influential factors as well. Thus, considering these two capitals it seems that a home rich with finances and education orientation can be considered as good predictors of educational achievement of these students.

Moreover, with the significant relationship shown for social capital, which is not so far researched in Sri Lanka in an educational setting, provides an insight into student achievements. A child who is allowed to be actively involved in family matters, such as grocery shopping, gardening and making family budgets as well practically using the subject knowledge for household things like fixing a light bulb or reusing/recycling which makes the family bond together, appears to be slightly influencing educational achievement. In addition, parental involvement into child's activities such as checking homework/textbooks, family outings, encouraging the child, spending time with child etc. which is 'bonding social capital' has influenced educational achievement of them. Moreover, parents being friends with the parents of child's friends' has a positive effect on educational achievement. Yet, social capital being the least influential capital for achievement at home presents an interesting factor where family interrelationships do not seem to matter as much as finances and human capital indicators. This could be mainly due to the exam oriented education system prevailing in Sri Lanka. Mainly when considering the financial capital being the highest influence it shows that the free education system is not providing equal opportunities for students. This is true when considering other research studies as well (Jayaweera, 2000; Gunawardhana, 2010). Rather, how much a parent can spend on the child and how influential parental credentials seems to be having more hold on educational achievement of the child.

The above discussed points are more evidenced when the following variables are considered. Province, the location of school (urban, rural, estate), whether a national school or a non-national school, medium of instruction as either Sinhala or Tamil, co-ed or single sex school and the gender of the student were considered as contributing variables for home capital. The study indicates that there is a significant positive effect of school location (Urban  $B=6.9$ ,  $P=.000$ , Rural ( $B=.87$ ,  $P<.05$ ), the school type with 1AB students achieving the highest ( $B=6.8$ ,  $P=.000$ ), the school being a government funded National school ( $B=5.6$ ,  $P=.000$ ), medium of instruction where Sinhala medium students achieve higher than the Tamil medium students ( $B=2.4$ ,  $P=.000$ ), province where the school is situated and North Western province having the highest achievers ( $B=3.7$ ,  $P=.000$ ) on student achievement of Grade 8 students of the sample. The gender of school has a significant

negative correlation ( $B=-1.75$ ,  $P=.000$ ) which indicates that students who study in co-ed school achieve less than the students of single sex schools. Gender of the student or the home social capital does not show a significant contribution to educational achievement when these school-wise variables are included in the model.

When the dummy variables are fitted into the model there seems to be a change in the impact of home capital. Before fitting the school-wise variables what was prominent for educational achievement was financial capital, but in this model it is human capital. This could be because the parental credentials have an influence on school enrollment than the financial status of the family. It leaves the question of equity in education in the state school system. What can be interesting is the insignificance of home social capital when these school-wise variables are fitted into the model. Even though social capital was the least effecting capital at home, it was significant when other contributors are not there. Yet, it is clearly apparent that when location of the school, the type of the school and the medium of instruction is varied, the inputs of home social capital become insignificant. Again this leaves the question whether exam-oriented education system undermines the family relationships of a child.

Finally, when considering other contributing factors for achievement, it seems that children who can afford to be in a singles sex, 1AB, national, urban school in the North Western province have a high probability of succeeding in education. As it is known in Sri Lanka, those who are from financially sound backgrounds of professional parents could enroll into these schools. Therefore, it is likely that the home financial and home human capital play a major role in student enrollment and then the school itself in turn provides an added advantage in achievement. This advantage is evident in elsewhere in the world too. Kannangara reforms in 1943 attempted to reduce the impact of these factors by free education and the central school system (Jayaweera, 2000), yet the failure in achieving the goal seems to be apparent in this sample as well.

### School capital

It appears that school human capital is the most influential in educational achievement ( $B=6.89$ ,  $P=.000$ ). Qualifications of teachers, their experience and training and as well qualifications of the principals their experience and training appears to be most influential over financial capital variables ( $B=2.82$ ,  $P=.000$ ), and social capital variables ( $B=.69$ ,  $P=.000$ ), at school. Financial capital was measured by the resources the school has and they are relevant to teaching. Social capital on the other hand, sought the student interactions with teachers and peers and also the sense of security and belongingness the students feel at school in addition to teacher attitudes regarding their students.

School capital presents a different picture comparative to home capital. Even though social capital is the least in both home and school, human capital of school tends to be greatly

influencing educational achievement. There was a slight difference between the influences of financial capital at home and the human capital. Yet, at school there is a major difference between the two. As mentioned above, it seems that having a better educated and better trained staff could be of more importance for educational achievement of students.

When school-wise dummy variables are fitted into the model, the effect of school financial capital ( $B=2.65, P=.000$ ) is greater than school human capital ( $B=2.42, P=.000$ ) and school social capital ( $B=.608, P<.05$ ). Without the school-wise variables, it is the human capital at school which impacted educational achievement than the financial capital. It can, therefore, be assumed that when school location, school type, and medium of instruction is combined with school level characteristics, it is the schools with more financial resources that provide better opportunities for students. For example, Type 1AB ( $B=6.33, P=.000$ ) schools over other three types of state schools, Urban schools ( $B=6.21, P=.000$ ) over rural ( $B=1.68, P<.05$ ) and Estate schools, North Western Province ( $B=5.48, P=.000$ ) over other provinces, National schools ( $B=4.19, P=.000$ ) over Non-national schools, Co-ed schools ( $B=-.868, P<.05$ ) below single sex schools show this dilemma. Again this shows how advanced Kannangara reforms had been where the policies tried to eliminate the inequalities related to location and school type which in turn would have provided an opportunity for schools to train teachers better for better educational achievement.

However, unlike with home capital, social capital at school has an effect on educational achievement both with ( $B=.608, P<.05$ ) and without ( $B=.687, P<.05$ ) the school-wise variables. This projects the similar finding to Coleman (1988) where he said Catholic schools in the United States fair well as they are close knitted as a community. In Sri Lankan context also it is apparent that the close knit culture of the school providing for better educational achievements. This is a point to be researched further in regard to social capital.

Schools too are, therefore, providing diverse opportunities in relation to school type, location, and the medium of instruction. This diversity seems to be creating unequal opportunities for student educational achievement, thus creating a competition among parents to enroll their children in the high achieving national 1AB schools. Apparently, this situation now has escalated to a few decades old stagnating dilemma in the system. Even though governments have proposed the removing of school types, unfortunately none has prospected so far.

## **Conclusion**

It seems evident that all six capitals impact educational achievement when the home capital and school capital are isolated from school location, school type and medium of instruction. If families are given the opportunities for financial improvements, human capital improvements and family social bonding to improve social capital, the child of the

family will be better in educational achievement. Same is true with school capital as well. If other school-wise differences do not combine with school capital, educating and training teachers and principals would improve student achievements. What is more interesting is how a combination of both home and school capital could improve educational achievement of students. It seems that more than improving social capital, improving home and school financial as well as human capital provide a better academic environment for students. Therefore, the country could benefit if they formulate policies to increase home, school financial and human capital.

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