

Educational Attainment of Vedda Parents: A Study From Uva Province, Sri Lanka

Saumya Bandara
Science Education Unit
Faculty of Science
University of Peradeniya
Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
saumyab@sci.pdn.ac.lk

Sakunthala Yatigammana
Department of Education
Faculty of Arts
University of Peradeniya
Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
sakuyatigammana@arts.pdn.ac.lk

Abstract—Studies have highlighted poor educational attainment of indigenous communities compared to their non-indigenous counterparts. Veddas are indigenous people in Sri Lanka and there is a lack of research on their formal education. Hence, this study's main objective was to examine Vedda parents' educational attainment while considering their livelihood. This study forms part of a larger research conducted on science education of Vedda people in Uva Province, Sri Lanka from 2018 to 2021 employing a mixed methods research approach and an inductive convergent research design. The study collected qualitative data from 27 science lesson observations and 68 semi-structured interviews with parents (Vedda/mainstream), students (Vedda/mainstream), science teachers and Vedda leaders. Quantitative data obtained through 494 survey questionnaires distributed among science teachers, parents (Vedda/mainstream) and students (Vedda/mainstream). Results showed poor educational achievements of both Vedda and mainstream parents. Majority of mainstream parents (46.5%) had completed senior-secondary level, while majority of Vedda parents (47.8%) had only completed primary level. Further, 13.0% of Vedda parents and 4.3% of mainstream parents had not received any formal schooling. Reasons for lower educational attainment of Vedda parents found to be lack of awareness about formal education of their parents and resulting poor interest in motivating children towards formal education. It is worth noting that the primary source of income for both groups was agriculture, only a minority engaged in government or private sectors. Lower educational attainment could be a reason for above finding. Hence, relevant measures are crucial to enhance educational attainment of Vedda parents and their mainstream counterparts.

Keywords—Indigenous communities, educational attainment, Vedda parents, mixed methods research

I INTRODUCTION

Educational attainment is the highest level of education that an individual has fulfilled [1]. Educational attainment enhances active participation in society. Educational attainment also affects employment and poverty [2]. Literature shows inequalities in educational attainment between rural and urban people in which rural individuals have low educational attainment compared to urban counterparts [3]. Further, a disparity in educational attainment can be seen among indigenous people and non-indigenous people where indigenous people show a lower educational attainment in contrast to the general population [4].

Indigenous people are those who consider themselves distinct from the mainstream societies that currently exist in their historical territories [5]. The concept of indigenous can be understood concerning priority in time, the continuous

cultural distinctiveness, self-identification and recognition of state authorities and others as a distinct group, and experience of oppression [6].

Indigenous people of Sri Lanka are called Veddas. The ancestry of Veddas dates back to nearly 30,000 years, millennia before the arrival of Aryans (Indian settlers) in Sri Lanka 2,500 years ago. Further, there are studies that show Veddas are the descendants of Balangoda Manavaya (*Homo sapiens balangodensis*), early hunter-gatherers from about 16,000 BC or possibly much earlier [7,8,9,10]. Initially, they were found throughout the island but now confined to a limited area known as VEDI Rata or Maha VEDI Rata from Hunnasgiriya mountains to lowlands down to the sea in the east. Vedda settlements can be found in Dambana, Rathugala, Henanigala, Pollebedda, Dalukana, Anuradhapura, Panama, Muttur, and Vakaraai at present. These settlements are spread in Uva Province, Eastern Province, and North Central Province of Sri Lanka [8,10,11].

Vedda people are also considered under compulsory education in Sri Lanka. Even though formal education was introduced to Vedda people about fifty years ago [8] and Vedda children also learn at schools alongside mainstream students, there are only a limited number of studies that give insights into the interaction between Vedda people and formal education including their educational attainment. Hence, the main objective of this article is to examine the educational attainment of parents of Vedda students in two selected Vedda settlements in contrast to their mainstream counterparts. Further, this article paid attention to the livelihood of Vedda parents and mainstream parents as livelihood is related to educational attainment.

II METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the above objective this article presents data collected from a larger study conducted on the science education of Vedda people in Uva Province, Sri Lanka from 2018 to 2021. Parents of Vedda and mainstream secondary-level (Grades 6 to 11) students of three selected schools adjacent to two well-established Vedda populations in Uva Province were considered in this study.

The above study employed a mixed methods research approach with an inductive convergent research design. Hence, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

Qualitative data were collected from 27 science lesson observations (23 minutes on average per lesson) and 68 semi-structured interviews conducted with Vedda parents, mainstream parents, Vedda students, mainstream students,

science teachers of the selected schools and Vedda leaders/senior community members.

Quantitative data were collected by 494 survey questionnaires from Vedda parents (N=23), mainstream parents (N=187), Vedda students (N=41), mainstream students (N=235) and science teachers (N=8). Questionnaire data were collected predominately using Likert items. Data on the educational attainment and livelihood of the parents were collected through two multiple-choice items in the questionnaire administered to the parents. Qualitative data were analysed thematically [12,13] whereas the quantitative data were analysed descriptively. Finally, the convergent analysis (integration of results) was conducted by directly comparing the qualitative and quantitative results (Fig. 1).

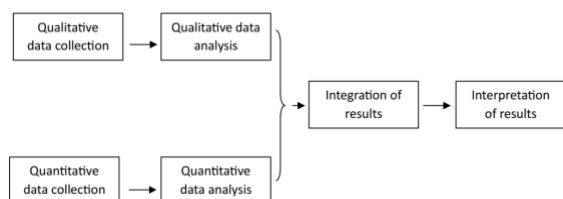


Fig. 1. Research design of the study

III RESULTS

The convergent analysis resulted in five shared themes and two unique themes. The five shared themes were view towards general education and science learning, support towards general education and science learning, challenges for science teaching and learning, suggestions to enhance science learning of Vedda students and mainstream students, and socioeconomic factors of parents. The unique themes were, good interaction between Vedda students and mainstream students and poor concern of authority on education of Vedda people. Findings on the educational attainment and livelihood of parents were found under the shared theme “socioeconomic factors of parents” and those findings are discussed in this article.

Quantitative data showed 47.8% of the Vedda parents had studied up to Grade 5. There were 26.1% educated up to G.C.E. (O/L). Only 8.7% were educated up to the G.C.E. (A/L). Further, 13.0% of Vedda parents had no school education (Fig. 2).

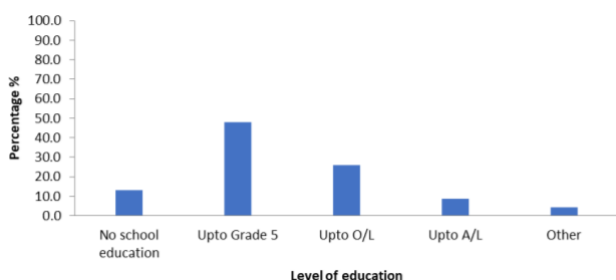


Fig. 2. Educational attainment of Vedda parents

In terms of the mainstream parents, 46.5% had studied up to G.C.E. (O/L) and 13.5% had studied up to G.C.E. (A/L). There were 4.3% of mainstream parents who had no school education and only 1.6% of mainstream parents had an education up to a basic degree level (Fig. 3).

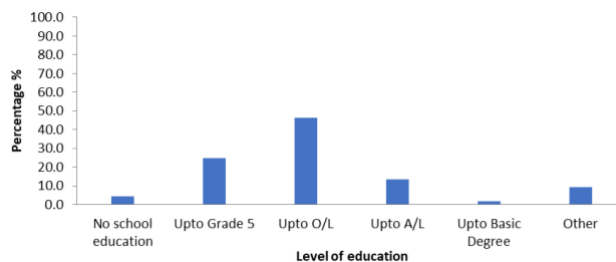


Fig. 3. Educational attainment of mainstream parents

Qualitative results depicted that there were Vedda parents who had no school education. A Vedda father and a Vedda mother responded, “I have not attended” (fieldnote 30.01.2020) and “No, I did not” (fieldnote 28.01.2020) respectively when they were asked about their school education. Another Vedda mother said that “No, I have not” (fieldnote 28.01.2020) when she was asked whether she had a school education.

Qualitative results provided evidence for Vedda parents having different levels of educational attainments. One Vedda father replied, “Up to five” (fieldnote 30.01.2020) when he was asked about his school education. Another Vedda mother mentioned, “I studied up to Grade 5” (fieldnote 28.01.2020). A different Vedda mother said, “I have studied only up to Grade 4” (fieldnote 28.01.2020). One Vedda mother mentioned, “I had attended school up to Grade 10” (fieldnote 30.01.2020) A different Vedda father responded, “I have attended school up to Grade 11” (fieldnote 15.08.2019).

Qualitative results represented reasons for poor attainment in the education of some Vedda parents. One Vedda parent said, “The reason is that our parents are indigenous. Therefore, they did not think of it [educating children] that much in those days. There was not much interest those days and they have not sent us to school” (fieldnote 28.01.2020).

One Vedda mother replied, “A, I could not do O/L. Even though I went to Grade 11, my mother got sick three months before O/L. So, because of that, my education got crippled” (fieldnote 30.01.2020). One Vedda leader stated, “When we were children we did not have a school to learn and there was nothing like a town” (fieldnote 28.01.2020).

Qualitative results also showed evidence for different levels of educational attainment of mainstream parents. Except for a few, the majority of the mainstream parents had educated at least up to the G.C.E. (O/L). Apart from that, there were some parents who had learnt up to the G.C.E. (A/L). One mainstream mother said that “I went to several schools. I did O/L at Atampitiya school” (fieldnote 10.02.2020). Another mainstream mother responded that “I went to the school “B”. I did O/L. I was there in the A/L class one year but I could not sit for the exam” (fieldnote 10.02.2020). A mainstream father mentioned, “I am Priyantha. I learnt only up to O/L. I attended this “C” secondary school [school C]” (fieldnote 17.02.2020). Another mainstream mother responded, “I am from Wadinagala. I went to the same school from grade one to A/L. I did A/L in arts stream” (fieldnote 17.02.2020).

Qualitative results also presented reasons for poor attainment in the education of some mainstream parents. One mainstream mother mentioned, “There were financial problems. Our parents were not keen on our education as much as we do today for our children. There were financial problems. That was why I dropped out” (fieldnote 10.02.2020). Another mainstream mother said that she was interested in sports rather than education, “Lack of my interest. I liked sports” (fieldnote 10.02.2020). A different mainstream mother mentioned that “There was no opportunity for us to go for an extra class those days and even the teachers were not there continuously” (fieldnote 17.02.2020).

According to the quantitative results 78.3% of the Vedda parents involved in agriculture. Further, the proportions of Vedda parents employed in the government sector and private sector were 4.3% in each sector (Fig. 4).

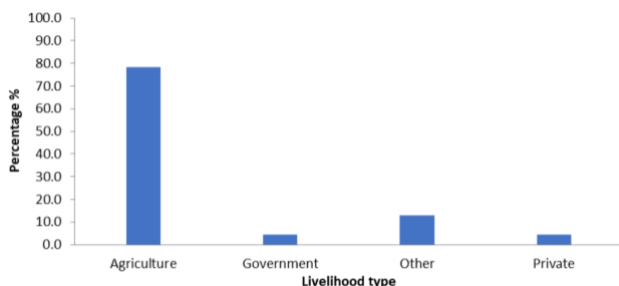


Fig. 4 Livelihood of Vedda parents

In contrast, 62.9% of the mainstream parents depended on agriculture (62.9%). There were 13.7% and 5.7% of mainstream parents who were involved in the government sector and private sector, respectively. Further, a proportion of 17.7% mainstream parents were employed in “Other” category (Fig. 5).

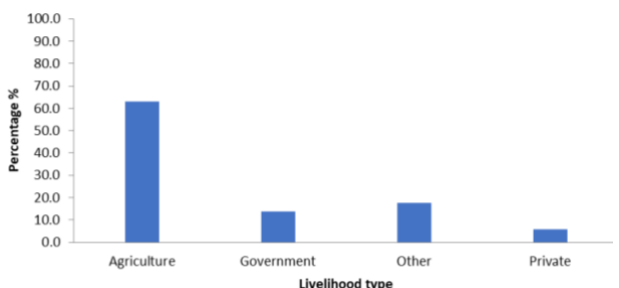


Fig. 5. Livelihood of mainstream parents

Qualitative findings provided evidence for the agricultural livelihood of the Vedda parents. One Vedda parent said that “We do chena cultivation [shifting agriculture], my husband does not do a government job, neither I. both of us do farming. So, when it takes farming and the cost for three children. The economy is for everything” (fieldnote 30.01.2020). Another parent mentioned, “We grow mung and cowpea. We also grow maize” (fieldnote 28.01.2020).

Evidence for other type of livelihoods also collected through qualitative data. One Vedda mother responded, “So, I work for hire, so, I earn 700 rupees [LKR 700] per day. From that, I have to buy food for them [her children] and also books for them” (fieldnote 28.01.2020). One Vedda mother stated, “I am working in this boutique and father is working for hire [as a labourer]” (fieldnote 28.01.2020).

Qualitative data showed evidence for Vedda parents working in the government sector as well. A Vedda mother said, “He [husband] works in the Civil Defense Force” (fieldnote 28.01.2020).

IV CONCLUSION

Quantitative data and qualitative data showed that the educational attainment of both parent groups was relatively poor. The above finding confirms the gap in educational attainment between rural and urban populations as the study was conducted in rural Uva Province.

However, the educational attainment of Vedda parents was lower than mainstream parents. The majority of mainstream parents had completed senior secondary level (46.5%) at school whereas the majority of Vedda parents had completed the primary level of school education (47.8%). Further, a higher proportion of Vedda parents (13.0%) had not received a school education compared to that of the mainstream parents (4.3%).

The above findings are parallel with the existing literature on the educational attainment of Vedda people. According to [8] the attainment of Vedda students in general education was extremely poor. Only eight members of the community had degree-level qualifications.

The reasons for the poor educational attainment of Vedda parents could be unawareness of their parents of the formal education and the resulting poor interest in motivating their children towards formal education. On the other hand, poor financial status of parents, lack of interest of students, lack of relevant learning opportunities and teachers could have resulted in poor educational attainment of mainstream parents. The poor financial situation could have been a decisive factor in the low educational attainment of Vedda parents as well.

Results show that the majority of the Vedda parents are not educated above the primary level. Hence, it is likely that Vedda children could not get enough academic assistance from their parents. Academic assistance from parents is important for students to navigate through the learning process. Moreover, due to the poor education level of parents, Vedda children would have to rely on their school teachers or additional learning opportunities like extra tuition classes.

Quantitative results showed that the most common source of income of both groups of parents investigated in this study was agriculture. Apart from that, a minority of parents were involved in the government sector, private sector, and other types of occupations. The percentage of Vedda parents involved in a government sector occupation or a private sector occupation was relatively less compared (8.6% in both government and private sectors) to mainstream parents. It could be assumed that the lower educational attainment of both parents resulted in the above findings as education impacts employment [14]. Therefore, a lower level of education leads to diminished livelihoods, making it challenging to educate the next generation. Consequently, this could lead to a cycle of lower educational levels in subsequent generations.

It could be suggested that more Vedda communities and their counterparts need to be studied to get a general idea of

their educational level and livelihood and the necessary actions required to be taken to develop the above aspects, especially with an understanding of the Vedda culture.

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