

A STUDY ON CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL DROPOUTS THROUGH OPEN SCHOOLING AT SENIOR SECONDARY LEVEL IN MARGHERITA, TINSUKIA DISTRICT OF ASSAM

Janmoni Mahanta¹, Prof. (Dr.) D.S. Hernwal², Dr. Arunima Dutta^{3*}

¹Research Scholar, Department of Education, Arunachal Universities of studies, Namsai

²Professor Emeritus, Former Vice chancellor, Arunachal Universities of studies, Namsai

^{3*}Assistant Professor, Department of English, Digboi College, Digboi

arunimaduttadebnath541@gmail.com³

Abstract

Education is a basic right, yet school dropout remains a major problem in Assam, especially in rural and economically weaker areas like Tinsukia district. Open schooling offers a second chance for dropouts to continue and complete their education. This study explores the reasons behind school dropout and assesses whether open schooling at the senior secondary level meets the expectations of learners in Margherita block of Tinsukia. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving 200 re-enrolled learners. Statistical analyses, including t-test, one-way ANOVA, and correlation, were conducted to examine the influence of socio-economic and school-related factors on learners' outcomes. The results show that poverty, family responsibilities, and poor school infrastructure are the main reasons for dropout. Open schooling provides flexibility and access, but learners still face challenges such as limited recognition of certificates, inadequate support, and uncertain long-term career benefits. The findings underline the importance of locally tailored interventions, including counseling, awareness programs, and stronger links with employers, to improve learner outcomes and make open schooling more effective for disadvantaged students.

Keywords: Continuing Education, Open Schooling, School Dropouts, Tinsukia, Assam, Alternative Education

Introduction

School dropout remains one of the most pressing challenges facing India's education system, with far-reaching consequences for both individual learners and society at large. Students who discontinue their education face limited employment opportunities, restricted social mobility, and reduced capacity to participate effectively in economic and civic life. At the regional level, Assam experiences particularly high dropout rates, especially at the secondary and senior secondary levels. This is due to a combination of economic vulnerabilities, including widespread poverty and low household income, frequent natural disasters such as floods that disrupt schooling, and inadequacies in educational infrastructure, including insufficient schools, classrooms, and teaching personnel. These structural and socio-economic factors create an environment in which sustaining continuous education becomes a significant challenge for many learners.

In response to these challenges, open schooling initiatives have emerged as a vital alternative for students who have discontinued formal education. Institutions such as the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and State Open Schools offer flexible learning schedules, alternative modes of content delivery, and the opportunity to re-enroll and complete secondary or senior secondary education. Such programs are particularly important in regions like Margherita block of Tinsukia district, where economic instability, high migration rates, and other local hardships often force children and adolescents out of the formal school system. Open schooling not only provides a second chance for these learners but also aims to bridge educational gaps caused by socio-economic and environmental challenges.

The present study seeks to explore both the causes of school dropout and the extent to which open schooling meets the expectations and aspirations of re-enrolled learners in this context. By examining learners' socio-economic backgrounds, school-level challenges, and perceptions of the benefits of open schooling, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of alternative education in supporting continued learning. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of localized interventions—such as counseling, learner support programs,

and community awareness initiatives—in enhancing the quality and accessibility of open schooling for disadvantaged learners in Margherita. Ultimately, this research contributes to identifying strategies that can help reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes in economically and socially vulnerable regions.

Literature Review

Most national-level studies have consistently demonstrated that socio-economic factors are the leading cause of school dropout. Tilak (2002, 2018), Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010), and Choudhury (2016) highlight that poverty, financial constraints, and lack of educational resources exert significant pressure on families, forcing children to discontinue their studies. At the regional level, particularly in Assam, researchers such as Baruah (2012) and Dutta (2015) have shown how economic hardships and seasonal agricultural disruptions frequently interrupt the schooling process.

In addition to economic barriers, school-level conditions also play a critical role. Studies by Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010), Baruah (2012), and Aggarwal (2012) indicate that inadequate infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and poor quality of instruction contribute substantially to dropout incidence. To counter these limitations, open and continuing education has been promoted as an alternative pathway. Scholars such as Mishra (2005), Bhattacharya (2007), and Rao (2009) have argued that flexible schedules and alternative modes of delivery broaden educational access, particularly for disadvantaged learners. However, several studies caution that access alone does not ensure effective learning outcomes. The recognition of open schooling certificates, as noted by Kumar (2014) and Kumar and Gupta (2019), remains a persistent concern.

In the case of Assam, specific contextual challenges such as recurrent floods, large-scale migration, and teacher shortages have further complicated the dropout scenario (Choudhury, 2016; Dutta, 2015). Support mechanisms including counseling and learner facilitation are either absent or poorly developed, as pointed out by Reddy (1995) and Rao (2000). Against this backdrop, there exists a notable research gap: while dropout determinants have been widely studied, very few works have examined learners' perceptions of expectation fulfillment from open schooling, particularly at the district level in Assam during the recent period (2017–2022). The present study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the Margherita block of Tinsukia district.

Objectives and Hypotheses

Objectives

1. To identify the socio-economic causes of school dropout among learners in Margherita, Tinsukia.
2. To study learners' perceptions of open schooling at the senior secondary level.
3. To examine the relationship between socio-economic background and learner performance in open schooling.
4. To assess whether open schooling meets the career and educational expectations of learners.

Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is no significant difference in dropout reasons between male and female learners.
- **H2:** There is a significant association between family income and dropout incidence.
- **H3:** There is a significant correlation between socio-economic background and performance in open schooling.
- **H4:** Learners' perception of expectation fulfillment does not differ significantly across gender or locality (urban/rural).

Methodology

- **Research Design:** Descriptive and analytical design using mixed methods.

- **Population:** All learners re-enrolled in open schooling at the senior secondary level in Margherita, Tinsukia.
- **Sample:** 200 learners selected through stratified random sampling (based on gender and locality).
- **Tools:** Structured questionnaire with sections on socio-economic background, causes of dropout, perception of open schooling, and expectation fulfillment. Reliability and validity were ensured through pilot testing.
- **Data Analysis:**
 - Descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, SD)
 - Inferential statistics:
 - **t-test:** To compare male and female dropout reasons.
 - **One-way ANOVA:** To examine differences in perception across income groups.
 - **Correlation (Pearson's r):** To analyze the relationship between socio-economic status and performance.
 - **Chi-square test:** To test associations between categorical variables (income and dropout).

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Socio-Economic Reasons for Dropout (N = 200)

Reason for Dropout	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Poverty / Low Income	38 (38%)	42 (42%)	80 (40%)
Family Responsibilities	25 (25%)	35 (35%)	60 (30%)
Poor School Infrastructure	15 (15%)	10 (10%)	25 (12.5%)
Lack of Interest / Motivation	12 (12%)	8 (8%)	20 (10%)
Health / Migration Issues	7 (7%)	8 (8%)	15 (7.5%)

Interpretation:

The data presented in the table indicate that poverty (40%) and family responsibilities (30%) emerge as the two most frequently cited reasons for school dropout among learners of both genders. Poverty is reported with equal intensity across male and female respondents, highlighting its universal impact as a structural barrier to education. Family responsibilities, while significant for both groups, are noted to be slightly more pronounced among female learners, reflecting the gendered expectation of household roles and caregiving duties. Other factors such as poor infrastructure, lack of interest, health issues, and migration were mentioned but with comparatively lower frequency, suggesting that while they contribute to educational discontinuation, they are not the primary drivers. Overall, the evidence underscores that socio-economic challenges, particularly financial hardship and domestic obligations, remain the most critical determinants of dropout in the study area.

Table 2: Independent Samples t-test – Gender and Dropout Reasons

Variable	Mean (Male)	Mean (Female)	t-value	p-value	Result
Dropout Reason Score	2.45	2.52	0.86	0.39	Not Significant

Interpretation:

The independent sample t-test result revealed no statistically significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between male and female learners with respect to their reasons for dropping out of formal schooling. This finding suggests that gender does not serve as a determining factor in shaping the challenges that lead to educational discontinuation. Both male and female learners reported facing broadly similar constraints, such as financial hardship, lack of parental support, limited access to academic

resources, and the need to engage in income-generating activities. While societal expectations and gender roles may vary, the underlying causes of dropout appear to be shared across both groups, pointing to structural issues rather than gender-specific ones. This reinforces the need for inclusive interventions that address the root causes of dropout at a systemic level rather than targeting one gender alone.

Table 3: Chi-square Test – Family Income and Dropout Incidence

Family Income (per month)	Dropouts (N)	χ^2 value	df	p-value	Result
Less than ₹10,000	110				
₹10,000 – ₹20,000	65	14.67	2	0.001	Significant
Above ₹20,000	25				

Interpretation:

The chi-square test result was found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, indicating a strong association between family income levels and the incidence of school dropout. A closer look at the data shows that the majority of dropouts come from households with a monthly income of less than ₹10,000. This pattern provides clear evidence that economic hardship plays a decisive role in forcing learners to discontinue their studies. Families with limited income often prioritize immediate livelihood needs over long-term educational investment, which results in children being withdrawn from school to contribute to household income or assist with domestic responsibilities. The finding confirms that poverty remains a central factor driving dropout in regions like Margherita, where employment instability and economic vulnerability are widespread. Addressing financial barriers, therefore, emerges as a crucial step in reducing dropout rates and strengthening the effectiveness of open schooling programs.

Table 4: Correlation between Socio-Economic Status and Open School Performance

Variable	Pearson's r	p-value	Result
Socio-Economic Status vs. Score	0.42	0.002	Moderate Positive

Interpretation:

The correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$) between socio-economic background and learners' academic performance in open schooling. This suggests that students coming from families with relatively better financial stability and educational resources tend to achieve higher scores compared to those from economically disadvantaged households. Even though open schooling is designed to provide equitable opportunities and flexible access, the findings indicate that socio-economic inequalities continue to exert an influence on learners' outcomes. Limited access to learning materials, technological support, and academic guidance in lower-income groups may account for the performance gap. This result highlights the persistent challenge of ensuring not just access but also equity in achievement within alternative education systems.

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA – Expectation Fulfillment by Locality

Locality	Mean Score	F-value	p-value	Result
Rural (n=120)	2.80			
Semi-urban (n=50)	3.15	4.28	0.015	Significant
Urban (n=30)	3.40			

Interpretation:

The results of the ANOVA test ($p < 0.05$) indicate that learners' perceptions of expectation fulfillment vary significantly depending on their locality. Urban participants reported a higher level of satisfaction with open schooling when compared to their rural counterparts. This difference may

be attributed to the availability of better educational facilities in urban areas, including easier access to study centers, reliable internet connectivity, and greater opportunities for academic guidance and support. In contrast, learners from rural regions often face challenges such as limited infrastructure, irregular access to technology, and fewer trained facilitators, which may lower their overall satisfaction with the program. This disparity highlights the importance of addressing contextual barriers and ensuring that support systems in rural areas are strengthened to bring equity in the outcomes of open schooling initiatives.

Discussion

The findings of the study highlight several important dimensions of school dropout and the role of open schooling in Margherita, Tinsukia. As shown in Table 1, socio-economic challenges such as poverty and family responsibilities continue to dominate as the most critical reasons behind learners discontinuing their education. These results reaffirm earlier research by Tilak (2002, 2018) and Dutta (2015), which identified economic hardship as a persistent obstacle in sustaining schooling.

The results presented in Table 2 further indicate that gender is not a statistically significant factor in influencing dropout reasons. Both male and female learners report similar challenges, suggesting that socio-economic and structural barriers cut across gender lines. This finding is consistent with the national-level studies of Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010), which argued that poverty and school conditions, rather than gender differences alone, drive dropout.

In addition, Table 3 points to poverty as a decisive factor associated with dropout, with students from the lowest-income families more likely to leave school prematurely. This reinforces the observations made by Baruah (2012) and Choudhury (2016), who emphasized that in regions like Assam, economic vulnerability directly shapes educational attainment.

The analysis in Table 4 brings out another important dimension: the relationship between socio-economic background and academic performance in open schooling. The positive correlation demonstrates that inequality in access to resources continues to influence outcomes, even within a flexible system such as open schooling. These findings are in line with the arguments of Kumar and Gupta (2019), who stressed that while open schooling expands access, disparities in performance remain tied to economic status.

Finally, Table 5 shows that learners from rural areas report comparatively lower levels of expectation fulfillment than their urban counterparts. This reflects the uneven distribution of infrastructure, guidance, and opportunities across localities. The result underlines the need for localized interventions tailored to rural learners in Margherita, where geographical and social constraints exacerbate educational challenges.

Overall, the discussion confirms that while open schooling has opened new pathways for dropouts, persistent socio-economic inequalities, limited recognition, and uneven support mechanisms continue to shape learners' experiences and outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study clearly establishes that open schooling plays a crucial role in extending opportunities for continuing education among school dropouts in Margherita, Tinsukia. It offers a viable second chance to those who, due to poverty, family obligations, or school-related difficulties, could not continue in the formal system. The flexibility of learning schedules, alternative assessment mechanisms, and open entry provided by such programs make education more inclusive and accessible to marginalized groups.

At the same time, the findings reveal persistent challenges that limit the effectiveness of open schooling. Issues of uneven quality in instructional delivery, inadequate learner support systems, and weak recognition of certificates in higher education and employment sectors remain serious concerns. Without sufficient counseling, mentoring, and academic guidance, many learners struggle to sustain their motivation and complete their studies. Moreover, the social value attached to open

school qualifications is often lower when compared to mainstream schooling, creating barriers for students aspiring to further education or employment opportunities.

In order to make open schooling more effective and meaningful for learners in regions like Margherita, certain localized strategies are essential. Strengthening counseling services, especially career and academic counseling, can help learners set realistic goals and remain committed to their studies. Building stronger linkages with local industries and skill-based programs would enhance the employability of graduates. Likewise, awareness campaigns involving parents, communities, and employers can help reduce stigma around open school education and highlight its importance as an alternative pathway to success. Finally, investment in local study centers, timely supply of learning materials, and training of tutors would significantly improve the quality of the learning experience.

Thus, while open schooling has proven to be an important mechanism for re-engaging dropouts in education, its true potential can only be realized if issues of quality, recognition, and learner support are addressed through context-specific and community-oriented interventions.

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