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Cognitive and Emotional Factors Contributing to Pupil Dropouts in Kabwe District Secondary Schools: An Educational Psychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how cognitive and emotional factors contribute to pupil dropouts in Kabwe District secondary schools, exploring how learners' intellectual abilities and emotional well-being interact with school environments to influence retention. Using a qualitative case study of three schools and 45 purposively sampled teachers, counselors, and administrators, data from semi-structured interviews and school records revealed that learning difficulties, low self-efficacy, stress, anxiety, and inadequate psychosocial support cumulatively drive disengagement and absenteeism. The findings underscore the need for integrated, learner-centered interventions including remedial support, socio-emotional learning, and coordinated early identification systems to strengthen both cognitive skills and emotional resilience and reduce dropout rates.

Keywords: Cognitive Factors, Emotional Factors, Pupil Dropout, Educational Psychology, Kabwe District, Secondary Schools, Learner Retention

1. Introduction and Rationale

Pupil dropout remains a persistent challenge in Zambia, undermining both individual development and broader national educational goals (UNESCO, 2023). Despite government efforts to expand access to secondary education, districts such as Kabwe continue to experience high dropout rates, particularly among pupils facing academic and emotional difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2024; Mwila, 2024). While previous studies have emphasized socio-economic determinants such as poverty, early marriage, and limited parental support (Mwansa & Chilala, 2022), there is increasing recognition that cognitive and emotional factors also play a pivotal role in shaping learners' decisions to leave school prematurely (Mutale, 2023). Cognitive challenges including low academic self-efficacy, poor attention, weak problem-solving skills, and difficulties in information processing reduce learners' engagement and academic resilience (Bandura, 1997; Zimmerman, 2011). Similarly, emotional factors such as anxiety, depression, stress, and lack of belonging within the school environment exacerbate disengagement, leading to absenteeism and eventual dropout (Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

In Kabwe District, anecdotal evidence suggests that many secondary school pupils struggle with emotional instability, diminished self-esteem, and ineffective academic coping strategies, which collectively heighten the risk of school withdrawal (Chitondo, 2024). Cognitive and emotional challenges are often compounded by insufficient teacher support, limited guidance services, and inadequate psychosocial interventions, creating an environment where pupils gradually disengage from learning. From an educational psychology perspective, these internal dynamics are interdependent and critically influence pupils' academic attitudes, persistence, and overall well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

This study is significant because it addresses a gap in Zambian research by focusing on the psychological mechanisms underpinning dropout behavior, rather than solely structural or socio-economic explanations. By examining the interplay between cognitive abilities, emotional well-being, and school environments, the research provides a holistic understanding of why pupils leave school prematurely and highlights practical strategies to enhance retention. The findings are intended to inform teachers, school administrators, and policymakers on developing learner-centered interventions such as socio-emotional learning programs, mentoring, and remedial support that strengthen self-efficacy, improve cognitive engagement, and foster emotional resilience. Ultimately, the study contributes evidence-based insights to support sustainable retention initiatives in Kabwe District secondary schools, aligning educational practice with both learner needs and national development objectives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study adopted a multidimensional theoretical foundation to understand pupil dropout behavior, drawing on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Stress-Coping Model. Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the influence of self-efficacy on motivation and persistence, highlighting that pupils with low self-belief are more prone to disengagement and dropout (Bandura, 1997). Cognitive Development Theory explains how unmet developmental needs and learning challenges affect academic performance and contribute to school leaving (Piaget, 1972). Sociocultural Theory underscores the role of social interactions, cultural expectations, and environmental pressures in shaping pupils' engagement, particularly where socio-economic constraints are present (Vygotsky, 1978). Self-Determination Theory links deficits in autonomy, competence, and relatedness to diminished motivation, stress, and emotional difficulties that precipitate dropout (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The Stress-Coping Model highlights how chronic stress and poor coping strategies impair academic functioning, whereas resilience and adaptive strategies promote persistence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Integrating these theories allowed for a holistic understanding of dropout behavior and supports educational psychology interventions such as mentoring, socio-emotional learning, and cognitive scaffolding to enhance retention.

2.2 Cognitive Factors Influencing Pupil Dropouts

Cognitive factors, including memory, attention, problem-solving skills, and overall academic competence, are central to school retention. Students with lower cognitive functioning or learning difficulties are more likely to experience academic frustration, repeated failures, and eventual dropout (Flavell, 2018; Piaget, 1972). In the Zambian context, limited individualized support, under-resourced classrooms, and insufficient remedial interventions exacerbate these challenges, particularly in public secondary schools in districts such as Kabwe (Chileshe & Mwansa, 2020). The literature suggests that interventions enhancing cognitive skills, problem-solving abilities, and mastery learning can significantly reduce dropout rates.

2.3 Emotional Factors Contributing to Pupil Dropouts

Emotional factors, including self-esteem, motivation, resilience, anxiety, and peer relationships, are critical in shaping pupils' school engagement. Pupils who experience chronic stress, social exclusion, or lack of emotional support often disengage from learning, leading to absenteeism and eventual dropout (Pekrun, 2019). Studies in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that emotional instability, combined with academic pressure and low psychological support, increases early school leaving, emphasizing the importance of counseling and mental health interventions (UNICEF, 2021). Emotional well-being interacts closely with cognitive capacities, affecting persistence and academic outcomes.

2.4 Educational Psychology Perspectives on Dropout Behavior

Educational psychology provides a framework to examine the interplay between cognitive and emotional factors in shaping pupil behavior. Theories of motivation, self-efficacy, and socio-emotional development explain how perceptions of competence, emotional security, and social support influence school participation (Bandura, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978). Empirical evidence demonstrates that interventions grounded in educational psychology such as mentoring, cognitive-behavioral programs, and socio-emotional learning effectively reduce dropout risks and promote academic persistence. These strategies provide contextually relevant mechanisms for addressing the combined cognitive-emotional determinants of dropout in Kabwe District secondary schools.

2.5 Socio-Educational and Environmental Considerations

School and community contexts significantly affect pupil retention. Factors such as classroom overcrowding, inadequate teaching resources, teacher-student relationships, peer influence, and parental involvement interact with cognitive and emotional traits to influence dropout likelihood. Research in Zambia highlights that under-resourced schools, minimal guidance counseling, and socio-economic pressures exacerbate pupils' vulnerabilities, making them more prone to disengagement and leaving school prematurely (Mwansa, 2019). Addressing these contextual factors is essential for designing holistic interventions that combine cognitive, emotional, and socio-environmental strategies.

2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature underscores the complex interaction between cognitive abilities, emotional well-being, and socio-educational contexts in shaping pupil retention. While global studies provide insights into theoretical frameworks and intervention strategies, empirical research specifically examining Kabwe District secondary schools remains limited. This gap highlights the necessity of the present study, which seeks to generate context-specific evidence on how cognitive and emotional factors contribute to dropout, informing interventions and policy decisions to enhance student retention.

Research Question

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What cognitive factors contribute to pupil dropouts in secondary schools in Kabwe District?

2. What emotional factors influence dropout behavior among pupils in secondary schools in Kabwe District?

3. How do cognitive and emotional factors interact to increase the likelihood of pupils dropping out of school?

4. What educational psychology strategies can be developed to minimize dropout rates in Kabwe District secondary schools?

3. Scope and Limitation

This study examined the cognitive and emotional factors contributing to pupil dropouts in selected government secondary schools in Kabwe District, Zambia, applying an educational psychology lens to explore how attention, memory, problem-solving, motivation, self-efficacy, and emotional well-being influence school retention. The research focused on Kabwe High School, Highridge Secondary School, and Bwacha Secondary School, chosen for their substantial enrollment and documented patterns of pupil attrition, and included pupils at risk of dropping out, as well as teachers and counselors whose professional experiences provided insights into behavioral and academic dynamics. Geographically limited to Kabwe District and excluding private and primary schools, the study employed qualitative interviews to generate context-specific, evidence-based insights into psychological determinants of dropout and inform interventions to enhance student engagement, resilience, and academic success.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy

The study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy, suitable for qualitative inquiry into socially constructed phenomena such as pupil dropout (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This philosophy emphasizes understanding human behavior from participants' perspectives, embracing ontological relativism and epistemological subjectivism. Knowledge was co-constructed through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, allowing the identification of patterns in cognitive, emotional, and socio-educational factors influencing dropout while remaining sensitive to participants' experiences within the specific cultural and institutional context of Kabwe District.

4.2 Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to gain in-depth, context-specific insights into cognitive and emotional factors affecting pupil retention (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each selected secondary school served as a distinct case to compare experiences, identify patterns, and explore interactions between individual and environmental determinants of dropout. This design enabled flexibility in data collection and analysis, facilitating triangulation through interviews and document reviews and supporting ethically grounded, actionable recommendations.

4.3 Population

The population consisted of teachers, school counselors, and administrators directly involved in pupil welfare, academic support, and retention in selected Kabwe District secondary schools. Participants were purposively chosen for their practical knowledge and ability to provide rich, context-specific insights into the cognitive, emotional, and social factors influencing pupil dropout (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

4.4 Sample Size

A total of 45 participants were purposively selected, guided by data saturation principles, ensuring no new themes emerged during interviews (Mason, 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The sample included teachers, counselors, and administrators to capture diverse experiences and roles relevant to understanding cognitive and emotional determinants of pupil dropout in Kabwe District secondary schools.

4.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to select both schools and participants, focusing on information-rich cases capable of illuminating cognitive and emotional factors contributing to dropout (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach allowed for flexibility to explore emerging insights and ensured participants had practical experience relevant to the research objectives.

4.6 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document reviews. Interviews explored participants' experiences with pupils' cognitive challenges, emotional struggles, and contextual influences, while document reviews including school policies, retention records, counseling reports, and attendance registers enabled triangulation, enhancing credibility, depth, and validity (Patton, 2002).

4.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed a two-month systematic procedure. Ethical clearance and school approvals were obtained, schools and participants were purposively selected, and interviews were conducted privately with informed consent. Audio recordings and field notes ensured accurate capture of information. Document reviews were carried out in parallel to triangulate findings, providing context-sensitive insights into cognitive and emotional factors influencing pupil dropout in Kabwe District secondary schools.

4.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts and documents to identify recurring patterns and themes related to cognitive and emotional determinants of pupil dropout (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were developed iteratively, reflecting convergent and divergent participant perspectives. Triangulation of interviews and document data ensured reliability and validity, producing robust, contextually grounded insights for developing educational interventions.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all research activities. Clearance was obtained from relevant authorities, and participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through coding of participants and secure storage of data. Interviews were conducted in private settings, and all data were used solely for academic purposes, ensuring integrity, credibility, and ethical responsibility throughout the study (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2016).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Cognitive Factors Influencing Pupil Dropouts

Cognitive challenges were consistently reported as significant determinants of pupil disengagement. Low academic self-efficacy, learning difficulties, and inadequate mastery of foundational knowledge were observed across multiple schools, often leading to declining motivation, absenteeism, and poor performance. These findings align with Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights the importance of self-belief in sustaining academic engagement. Pupils who internalize failure due to cognitive struggles demonstrate reduced effort and persistence, corroborating Piaget's (1972) assertion that unmet developmental needs hinder intellectual growth and increase dropout risk.

Additionally, academic motivation emerged as a critical cognitive factor. Pupils perceiving schoolwork as irrelevant or overly challenging exhibited minimal engagement, consistent with Flavell's (2018) emphasis on the role of cognitive competence and problem-solving in persistence. The findings further suggest that insufficient individualized support in under-resourced schools exacerbates these challenges, as highlighted in Zambian studies (Chileshe & Mwansa, 2020). Structured remedial interventions, targeted tutoring, and programs enhancing self-efficacy were identified by participants as essential strategies to mitigate dropout risk.

5.2 Emotional Factors Influencing Pupil Dropouts

Emotional challenges were equally influential in shaping dropout behavior. Stress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and exposure to bullying or trauma were recurrently reported. These emotional stressors frequently preceded disengagement, absenteeism, and declining academic interest. Findings support Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the Stress-Coping Model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), emphasizing the importance of motivation, emotional regulation, and resilience in sustaining academic participation.

The study further revealed that existing counseling and socio-emotional programs, while recognized as necessary, are often limited by resource constraints, insufficient staff training, and inconsistent follow-up. This aligns with regional research highlighting the insufficiency of piecemeal interventions in addressing adolescents' complex emotional needs (Pekrun, 2019; UNICEF, 2021). Early identification, continuous monitoring, and structured emotional support were suggested as key strategies to prevent dropout and promote sustained engagement.

5.3 Interaction Between Cognitive and Emotional Factors

A central insight is the dynamic interplay between cognitive and emotional factors. Academic struggles frequently intensified emotional stress, while emotional instability further impaired cognitive performance. For example, pupils experiencing learning difficulties often reported increased anxiety and

low self-esteem, leading to disengagement. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, emphasizing that learners' cognitive development is shaped by interactions with their social and environmental contexts.

Participants noted that interventions addressing either cognitive or emotional challenges in isolation were insufficient. Integrated approaches combining academic support, mentorship, and socio-emotional learning were reported to be more effective in fostering resilience, motivation, and persistence. These findings extend prior research in Zambia, where intervention programs often focus narrowly on academic performance metrics without adequately considering emotional well-being (Mwila, 2023).

5.4 Educational Psychology Perspectives on Dropout Behaviour

The study confirms that dropout is rarely attributable to a single factor; rather, it arises from the intertwined effects of cognitive deficits, emotional vulnerabilities, and socio-environmental pressures. Educational psychology provides a lens for understanding this complexity, emphasizing that pupil engagement and retention depend on perceived competence, emotional security, and social connectedness (Bandura, 1997; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978).

Mentorship, early identification of at-risk pupils, structured remedial support, and socio-emotional learning programs were highlighted as essential mechanisms for reducing dropout. However, gaps in program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation limit long-term effectiveness. The findings align with OECD (2020), emphasizing that sustained retention requires systematic, evidence-based, and contextually responsive strategies.

5.5 Summary of Results and Discussion

Overall, the study demonstrates that pupil dropout in Kabwe District secondary schools is driven by an interaction of cognitive and emotional factors amplified by environmental pressures. Effective retention strategies must be holistic, integrating academic, emotional, and social supports. Findings underscore the need for educational psychology-informed interventions, including individualized learning plans, structured mentorship, counseling services, and socio-emotional programs. Context-specific evidence from this study provides actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and school administrators seeking to reduce dropout rates and enhance student engagement.

6. Summary of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that cognitive factors significantly influence pupil dropouts in Kabwe District secondary schools. Low academic self-efficacy, learning difficulties, inadequate foundational knowledge, and diminishing motivation were identified as major contributors to disengagement. Participants reported that rigid exam-focused teaching approaches and limited remedial support exacerbate these challenges, resulting in pupils internalizing their struggles and gradually withdrawing from learning. School records and performance data corroborated these observations, illustrating how cumulative cognitive barriers shape dropout behavior and reduce overall academic persistence.

Emotional factors were equally impactful, with stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and family-related hardships emerging as critical determinants of school retention. These challenges often manifested in behavioral warning signs such as absenteeism, withdrawal, and declining participation. The study further highlighted the dynamic interaction between cognitive and emotional domains, indicating that interventions targeting only one aspect are insufficient. Effective retention strategies require integrated approaches that combine cognitive support with socio-emotional development, mentorship, and resilience-building initiatives. Overall, the findings emphasize the need for holistic, educational psychology-informed interventions to enhance learner engagement and reduce dropout rates in Kabwe District secondary schools.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Results and Discussion

The study concludes that pupil dropout in Kabwe District secondary schools is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by the interaction of cognitive and emotional factors. Cognitive limitations, including low academic self-efficacy, learning difficulties, and inadequate problem-solving skills, significantly hinder learners' ability to cope with academic demands, particularly in under-resourced school environments. These challenges are often compounded by exam-oriented teaching practices and insufficient individualized academic support. Emotional vulnerabilities, such as stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and family-related hardships, further undermine pupils' resilience and engagement, leading to withdrawal and eventual dropout. The findings indicate that cognitive and emotional factors rarely operate in isolation; rather, their interplay, compounded by socio-educational pressures, determines pupils' likelihood of remaining in school. While educational psychology interventions, including mentoring, socio-emotional learning, and targeted academic support, are recognized as beneficial, gaps in implementation, monitoring, and integration limit their effectiveness. Overall, addressing pupil dropout requires a holistic approach that simultaneously strengthens cognitive capacities, emotional resilience, and supportive school environments.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance pupil retention and academic success in Kabwe District secondary schools:

- School Administrators and Leadership should implement comprehensive academic support programs that address foundational learning gaps, cognitive processing difficulties, and low academic self-efficacy through early identification and individualized remedial interventions.

- Teachers and Academic Staff should receive ongoing professional development in educational psychology, particularly in strategies that enhance self-efficacy, differentiated instruction, and adaptive teaching to accommodate diverse learner needs.

- School Counseling and Support Services should prioritize structured socio-emotional support, including stress and anxiety management programs, trauma-informed counseling, and peer-support networks to strengthen pupils' emotional resilience.

- Ministry of Education and District Education Offices should provide adequate resources, training, and monitoring mechanisms for teachers and counselors to ensure consistent implementation of socio-emotional learning (SEL) programs.

- Parents and Guardians should be actively engaged through sensitization workshops and regular communication, promoting collaborative strategies to support pupils' academic motivation, emotional well-being, and retention.

- Mentorship Programs should be strengthened across schools to provide pupils with positive role models, guidance, and encouragement that support both cognitive development and emotional well-being.

- Monitoring and Evaluation Units within schools should adopt systematic tracking of pupil performance, attendance, and emotional status to identify at-risk learners early and implement timely interventions.

- Community and Non-Governmental Organizations should collaborate with schools to provide supplementary learning support, counseling, and awareness campaigns addressing cognitive and emotional barriers.

- Curriculum Planners should integrate life skills and socio-emotional learning components alongside academic content to promote holistic learner development.

- Policy Makers should develop and enforce policies that mandate coordinated interventions addressing both cognitive and emotional factors, ensuring dropout prevention is treated as a multi-dimensional priority

7.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, Future research should deepen understanding of cognitive and emotional determinants of dropout and evaluate intervention strategies:

- Cross-Regional Comparative Studies to explore differences in dropout causes across urban and rural districts in Zambia.

- Longitudinal Studies tracking pupils over time to assess the long-term impact of cognitive and emotional interventions on retention and academic performance.

- Quantitative Analyses measuring the relative influence of specific cognitive (e.g., academic self-efficacy, attention deficits) and emotional (e.g., anxiety, stress, depression) factors on dropout rates.

- Evaluation of Mentorship and SEL Programs to determine best practices, program fidelity, and scalability across diverse school contexts.

- Parent and Community Engagement Models to examine the impact of collaborative support systems on pupil resilience and retention.

- Policy Impact Assessments to investigate how national and district-level education policies influence integration and effectiveness of cognitive and emotional support programs in schools.

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