



Factors Contributing to Poor Academic Performance among Learners with Special Educational Needs. A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools in Lilongwe District, Malawi.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing the academic performance of learners with special educational needs (SEN) in secondary schools within Lilongwe District, Malawi. Despite existing literature on SEN learners globally, there remains a significant gap in understanding the localized factors affecting these students, especially in the context of Malawi's socio-political and cultural environment. The research explores the roles of teacher preparedness, availability of resources, cultural perceptions of disabilities, and the involvement of parents and the local community in shaping the academic outcomes of SEN students.

A mono qualitative method approach was used, combining surveys and interviews to collect data from SEN learners across selected secondary schools in Lilongwe District. The findings reveal that teacher preparedness, access to specialized resources, and supportive school infrastructure are critical determinants of academic success for SEN learners. However, cultural stigma surrounding disabilities and insufficient parental involvement remain significant barriers to achieving optimal educational outcomes.

Based on these findings, the study makes several recommendations, including the need for targeted teacher training in special education, increased investment in learning resources and infrastructure, and community-wide awareness campaigns to reduce stigma. The research contributes valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by SEN learners in Malawi and provides a foundation for policy development aimed at improving educational outcomes for this marginalized group.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right. Each and every individual has the right to acquire education, and any infringement on their access to education – quality education for that matter, is a violation of human rights. Education is meant for everyone (United Nations, 2016). This means that no one, regardless of social, economic, physical, mental abilities should be denied access to education. However, access to quality education is still a challenge in developing countries (Ahmadi & Lukman, 2015). They further assert that there are many issues affect the access to quality education. Worldwide, acquisition of education is from various education institutions that offer the education service at different levels.

Despite having various structures in the formal education structure, all students are measured by one common element, academic performance (Davis, 2013). While schools may mold the general behavior and personality of a student, their primary deliverable is to ensure that they equip them students with knowledge, so vast, that when measured on a metric score against determinants of academic performance, they should record positive results, and thus academic performance (Chimwaza , 2016). The students are expected to strive and excel academically (Hurwitz, et al., 2020).

However, students are composed of varying demographics. Being human beings, the functionality of their brains vary from one student to another. This also mean that their performance in class differ from student to student (Hammond , 2021). As such, the performance of the students can either be good or poor. Each of this type of performance is a result of a combination of certain factors. Therefore, this study investigated the factors leading to poor performance of learners with a focus on those who have special educational needs.

This chapter contains the introduction to the study, background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the research, research objectives, research questions, significance of the study, scope of the study, operational definition of terms and theoretical framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Literature Review

Learning in schools is characterized by focusing on developing critical thinking, problem solving, and analytical skills, these in all extends the learners content comprehension which can be put in learning style dimensions that can be described as abstract, active, reflective and concrete (Babik & Gardner, 2021). It involves a shift from primary based learning to a more conceptual and abstract approach. Teachers employ a range of teaching methods, including lectures, discussions, group work, and project-based learning. This involves learning style elements that comprise of learning in several ways like auditory, visual, and tactual perceptual strengths. Nowadays, it is commonly noted that new secondary school curriculums are characterized with a surge in technological revolution, not it is more of a learner centered than teacher centered. The focus nowadays is to develop natural talents to enhance intellectuality, to increase knowledge and understanding (Agran , et al., 2020).

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Due to the fact that students are different in terms of their abilities, inclusive education is being enforced and implemented in all school, including secondary schools (Morina, 2016). Inclusive education is defined as an educational approach that proposes that schools should create an environment where all students, those with special needs inclusive, can participate and all are treated like valuable school members. It is a practice that aims to improve the learning and active participation of all the students in a common educational context (Opoku, 2024). Inclusive learning facilitates the necessary adjustments, technologies that facilitate learning to be possible for all students, including those with disabilities. Inclusive learning aims at providing equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Cheng & Lai, 2020).

Now, schools nowadays are shaped to be inclusive (Morina, 2016). This means that, the learning environment is to be created in a way that it provides a conducive area for student with disabilities to acquire their education just as those with no disabilities would do. As such, this research will focus only on the students with special needs in Secondary schools. Tuomi (2013) further wrote that the teaching and learning process also strive to reduce the gap between the abled and those living with disabilities by providing inclusive learning, acknowledging the diverse needs of students. In agreement to this, Morina (2016) aseerted that through modified curricula and teaching methods, assistive technologies and resources such as open educational resource(OER) initiative, supportive services like speech therapy and counseling.

Secondary schools strive to incorporate inclusive practices, which some of them might include, individualized education programs (IEPs), these are plans to cater for or to the specific learning needs of students with disabilities, outlining goals, accommodations, and support services (McCoy, et al., 2020). The other practice is Assistive technology, which provides adaptive tools and technologies to help students access information communicate and participate in learning activities effectively. In addition, there is also differentiated instruction which tailors teaching strategies, materials, and assessments to meet the diverse learning styles and needs of all students. Last but not the least is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), this is designing learning environments and materials to be accessible and engaging for all students, regardless of their disabilities (Cheng & Lai, 2020).

Nevertheless, there are factors that shape the academic performance of these students, being factors that may enhance or reduce the performance of the students. Therefore, this research will dwell much on the factors that shape the academic performance of the students in secondary schools. In these institutions they measure their academic performance often through evaluating grades and grade point averages(GPAs), Standardized test scores (i.e. SATs, ACTs), project based assessments as well as class participation and engagement (Hurwitz, et al., 2020)..

Research studies have been conducted to assess factors that affect the academic performance of students. Research findings have found that the intellectual ability, emotion ability, motivation, socioeconomic factors, emotional development, teaching quality and lastly school environment all affect the performance of students at various levels (Williams, et al., 2020).

The intellectual Ability; this involves cognitive abilities including memory attention, and problem solving skills. Motivation entails students' intrinsic and extrinsic interest and desire to learn. Some of the interest includes being judgmental on learning and teaching factor, educational environment and material factor also affects the desire to learn in students (Davis, 2013). In some context peer relationships and interactions provide affordances for social support that can increase the desire to learn more.

The academic performance of students encounters quite a number of challenges that distort the delivery of the desired quality education in the formal learning institutions. This problem is a prevailing factor in developing nations especially in the sub-Saharan countries (Ahmadi & Lukman, 2015). A research study on challenges facing quality education delivery in secondary schools found that affect inadequate resources and facilities are a common challenge in West African schools (Hammond , 2021). This is to say that the schools lack specialized equipment, materials, and trained staff.

1. Boys and Girls with Special Educational Needs: A Comparative Study on Academic Performance

A study by Smith et al. (2018) explored gender differences in academic performance among SEN learners in secondary schools. The findings indicated that male students with learning disabilities performed worse than their female counterparts. It was suggested that gender-based teaching methods could be one of the contributing factors to the poor academic performance of male SEN learners, which is relevant to the context of Lilongwe District where gender roles often influence educational experiences.

2. Impact of Teacher Training on the Academic Performance of SEN Learners

According to Jones (2019), the lack of specialized teacher training in handling students with special needs is a significant factor in the poor academic performance of these learners. The study found that teachers often lacked the skills to implement individualized education plans (IEPs), leading to inadequate instruction. This gap in teacher preparedness is a major issue in Malawi, where there is a shortage of trained special education teachers in secondary schools.

3. Socio-Cultural Factors Affecting the Academic Performance of Learners with Special Needs

A study by Moyo (2020) examined how socio-cultural attitudes toward disabilities in Malawi impact the educational outcomes of SEN learners. The study highlighted negative societal perceptions and stigmatization of children with disabilities, which often leads to lower expectations and less academic support from both teachers and peers. Such socio-cultural barriers contribute significantly to the poor academic performance of SEN learners in Lilongwe.

4. Infrastructural Challenges in Special Needs Education

According to a report by the Malawi Ministry of Education (2017), inadequate school infrastructure, such as poorly maintained buildings, lack of ramps for wheelchair users, and limited assistive technology, negatively affects the academic performance of SEN learners. These infrastructural barriers prevent students from fully participating in the learning process and limit their access to educational resources.

5. Parental Involvement and Academic Performance of SEN Learners

A study by Chirwa and Phiri (2018) explored the role of parental involvement in the academic success of SEN learners in Malawi. It was found that limited parental engagement, especially in rural areas, played a role in the academic struggles of these students. The study highlighted that parents often lacked the knowledge and resources to support their children's learning at home, which contributed to the poor performance of SEN learners.

6. The Role of Peer Support in the Academic Success of Learners with Special Needs

A study by Ntuli (2017) focused on peer support in the classroom as a key factor affecting the academic performance of SEN learners. The research found that when SEN students received positive support and encouragement from their peers, their academic performance improved. However, a lack of inclusion and negative peer attitudes, which are prevalent in many secondary schools in Malawi, led to poor academic outcomes.

7. Curriculum and Pedagogical Challenges in Teaching Learners with Special Needs

Research by Banda and Mkwinda (2019) indicated that the general curriculum used in Malawi's secondary schools does not accommodate the needs of SEN learners. The study revealed that the curriculum often lacks flexibility, and teaching strategies are not tailored to different disabilities. This misalignment between the curriculum and the needs of SEN students significantly contributes to their underperformance in academic assessments.

Factors at the school setting that leads to poor grades in learners with special educational needs.

Generally, several factors affect the academic performance of student, arising from both teachers' delivery and students' ability to grasp the content being taught (Ryan & Kilday, 2022). Teachers' inability to deliver content that would be comprehensively grasped by the students does not necessarily imply skill inadequacy in the teachers. This is because a study in central remote Nigeria found that most government schools had inadequate building facilities and there were no enough materials to be used in teaching and learning in government owned institutions than the private owned institutions (Ryan & Kilday, 2022).

Teaching Quality; the effectiveness of teachers in delivering instruction, providing feedback and fostering a positive learning environment (Agran, et al., 2020). This describes the perspectives on good teaching rooted in standards for entry, preparation and practice. This involves teaching and learning as a wide ranging knowledge base that combines an understanding of content, pedagogy, and learners to focus on meeting students diverse social, emotional, and academic needs. (Cheng & Lai, 2020).

School environment, this comprises of physical infrastructure, safety, and overall school culture (Lauglo, 2005). The construct of school climate acts as a way to enhance student achievement and reduce problem behaviors. It also involves community and institution environment. Therefore this is a multidimensional and influences many individuals, including students, parents, school personnel and the community, in way that it can be a positive influence on the health of the learning environment or a significant barrier to learning (Tuomi, 2013).

A research study on the transitioning for students with special education needs by McCoy, et al., stated that much of the challenge in this transition stems from changing social structures and encountering different learning environments (McCoy, et al., 2020). Drawing on large-scale longitudinal data from over 7000 young people, the study examined the extent to which students with different SEN experience additional transition barriers to their peers (McCoy, et al., 2020). The findings of the study show that young people with SEN are more likely to experience a negative transition to secondary school. Furthermore, the type of need matters and students with general learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities are three times more likely to experience poor transition compared to young people without SEN. Transition experiences also vary by gender and socio-economic status, with girls and lower socio-economic groups more at risk (McCoy, et al., 2020).

A study on shortages in special education by Mason-Williams, et al., (2019) found that skilled teacher shortage was the main challenge that stemmed all the other challenges. They further asserted that shortage undermines equal educational opportunity. The study established that high enrolment and recruitment of teachers as a challenge that ends up affecting students with disabilities to access education (Mason-Williams, et al., 2019)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

Research design is the framework of research methods and techniques chosen by a researcher (MacDonald and Headlam, 2005). The design allows researchers choose the research methods that are suitable for the subject matter and defines the data collection methods and analysis to be adopted (Saunders, et al., 2023). This research study adopted a mono research design. The specific design was a qualitative design. Qualitative design aligned with the interpretivism as the study's research philosophy because qualitative studies allows the study to collect meanings and context from the participants which are then interpreted.

Study Population

A population is defined as the total number of subjects under study (Saunders, et al., 2023). Population can also be stated as a collection of objects or individuals where the sample for statistical estimation is drawn or the entire group that you want to draw conclusions. The population of this study was 23 students with special education needs across all schools, with Mkomachi having 9 students and Lilongwe girls having 14.

Sample size and sampling technique

A sample is a representation of the population. A consensus on the appropriate sample size for qualitative research is yet to be reached by researchers. Different researchers have indicated that there is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample as more data does not necessarily lead to more information (data saturation). Therefore, the sample size of the study was determined by saturation at 19 participants.

Purposive sampling was used in data collection. Purposive sampling is used in research to select a specific group of individuals or units of analysis. Saunders et al (2023) mentioned that with purposive sampling you need to use your judgment to select cases that will best enable you to answer your research question(s) and to meet your objectives. For this reason, it is sometimes known as judgmental sampling. Purposive sampling was selected because there were specific people to respond to the questionnaire in order to get the rightful information. The study targeted students with special education needs only.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1.2

Data collection rate

The study had a target population of 23 students with special education needs. However, the saturation point of the study was reached upon reaching 19 participants. Therefore, the study collected data from 19 students only. The table 4.1 below shows.

Table 4.1 Data collection rate

Population	Data collected	Collection success rate
23	19	82.6%

Gender of the participants

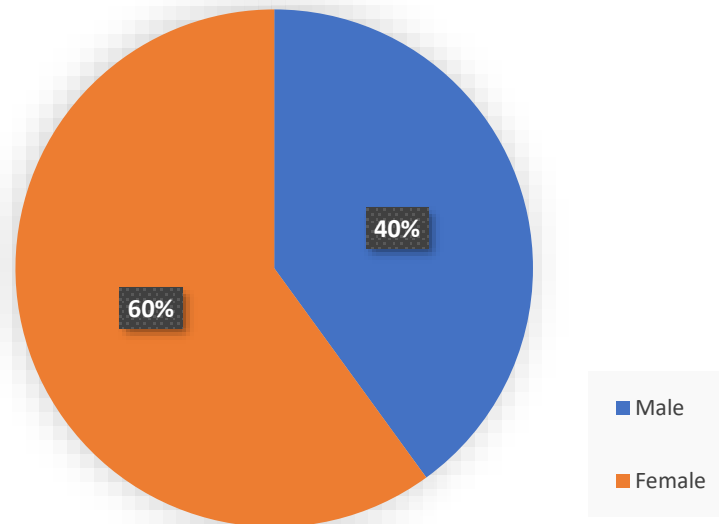


Figure 4.1 Gender of the participants

The figure 4.1 above shows the gender of the participants. The findings show that the study had more female students with special needs (60%) than males (40%). This implies that the majority of students with special needs in secondary schools in Lilongwe urban are females.

4.4.1 Findings on socio-cultural factors that affect the academic performance of SEN learners in secondary schools

Community related factors

Table 4.2 Community related factors

Main theme	Sub theme
Neglect	Not paying attention to needs
Under looked	
Discrimination	
Help mobility	
Embraced presence	Considered and treated as normal
Social inclusion	
Attitudes and stigma	

The table 4.2 shows the factors that arise from the community and societal perspectives that contribute to the performance of students with special needs. The findings in the table show that students with special education needs face neglect in the community. The society does not pay attention to them. The participants emphasized that the society has negative perception and attitudes towards the special needs students. The participants highlighted discrimination and being under looked in the society. This means that their capabilities cannot surface as the community already regards them as individuals without abilities – disabled. However, a few other participants uttered positive remarks on the issue stating that they are embraced in the society as such they are treated at any person, the community aids in the mobility of those who cannot walk, and there is social inclusion as such that they are included in programs and activities that are happening in their various communities.

Findings on teachers preparedness and the availability of specialized teaching strategies for SED learners

Skill and knowledge on SEN and how to handle them

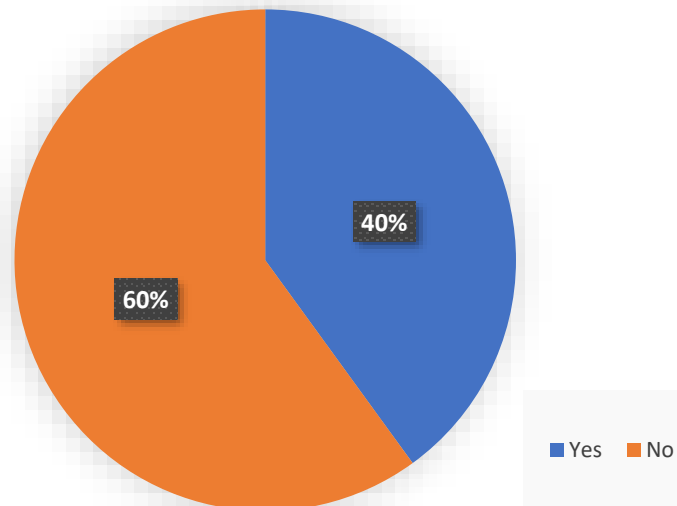


Figure 4.2 Teacher's skills and knowledge to handle students with SEN

The figure 4.2 above shows the perception of the students on whether their teachers have the skills and knowledge on handling students with special education needs. The study established that students perceive that their teachers do not have the skills and knowledge on handling students with special education needs (60%).

MAJOR FINDINGS

The findings suggest that while there are significant efforts being made to support SEN students, critical gaps remain, particularly in terms of teacher training, specialized resources, and inclusive school infrastructure. The lack of adequate training for teachers, coupled with the shortage of assistive technologies and learning materials, directly impacts the academic performance of SEN learners. Moreover, negative cultural attitudes and limited parental involvement further hinder the success of these students, making it difficult for them to fully participate in school activities and achieve their academic potential.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on research into the performance of students with special educational needs (SEN) at secondary schools in Lilongwe District, Malawi, some suggestions are made to reverse the challenges highlighted and improve outcomes in education. To begin with, teacher training and ongoing professional development must be enhanced to equip teachers with inclusive pedagogy skills. Secondly, the schools need to invest in special learning materials, assistive technologies, and efficient resource allocation to cater to SEN students. Thirdly, increased parental participation and conducting community awareness campaigns can revolutionize cultural perceptions about disabilities and create a facilitative environment. Fourthly, increasing school infrastructure by ensuring accessibility materials such as ramps, broad doorways, and inclusive classroom design will provide equal opportunities to SEN students. Fifth, government and policy support should continue beyond developing inclusive education policies and additional funding to ensure that schools have the necessary resources and trained personnel. Sixth, anti-stigma campaigns and peer support groups should be implemented to promote social inclusion and assist in lowering negative cultural attitudes towards disability. Seventh, strengthening teacher-student relationships through individualized learning plans can help enhance student motivation and self-esteem. Lastly, institutions must establish monitoring and assessment mechanisms to track SEN students' performance, determine intervention effectiveness, and provide feedback mechanisms for continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

The academic performance of learners with special educational needs (SEN) in secondary schools in Lilongwe District, Malawi, is influenced by a range of factors, including teacher preparedness, the availability of resources, cultural perceptions of disabilities, and the level of parental and community involvement. This study has highlighted both the challenges and the opportunities for improving the educational outcomes of SEN learners in the region.

The findings suggest that while there are significant efforts being made to support SEN students, critical gaps remain, particularly in terms of teacher training, specialized resources, and inclusive school infrastructure. The lack of adequate training for teachers, coupled with the shortage of assistive technologies and learning materials, directly impacts the academic performance of SEN learners. Moreover, negative cultural attitudes and limited parental involvement further hinder the success of these students, making it difficult for them to fully participate in school activities and achieve their academic potential.

However, the study also uncovered key areas for improvement. Investing in teacher training, increasing the availability of specialized resources, and fostering a more inclusive school environment are essential steps towards enhancing the academic performance of SEN learners. Additionally, changing cultural perceptions of disabilities and encouraging greater parental involvement will provide the necessary support for these learners both in and outside the classroom.

To create a more inclusive educational system for SEN learners in Lilongwe District, a collaborative approach involving teachers, parents, schools, communities, and policymakers is required. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, the educational outcomes for SEN students can be significantly improved, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their abilities, have the opportunity to succeed academically.

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