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## **Exploring the Factors Contributing to Dropout Rates Among Disabled Pupils in Selected Primary Schools in Dedza District, Malawi**

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### **ABSTRACT :**

The dropout rates among pupils with disabilities remain a significant educational concern in Malawi, particularly in Dedza District. The factors influencing the dropout rates of children with impairments in specific primary schools are examined in this study. The study employs a quantitative research methodology and emphasises on factors related to educators, educational institutions, and pupils that influence dropout rates. The findings indicate that a lack of specialised teaching materials, poor infrastructure, social stigma, and insufficient teacher preparation are the main causes of high dropout rates. The article emphasises the need for regulatory changes and additional resources for inclusive education.

**Keywords:** Disability, Dropout Rates, Inclusive Education, Primary Schools, Malawi

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### **1. Introduction :**

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right (UNESCO, 2016). Nonetheless, children with disabilities remain one of the most marginalised populations because of significant barriers to acquiring and completing basic education (World Bank & WHO, 2011). Malawi has attempted to advance inclusive education through programs such as the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2015). Despite these initiatives, Dedza District's high dropout rates among pupils with disabilities necessitate further investigation into the factors that influence these rates.

The 2008 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that everyone should have equal access to high-quality education. However, structural obstacles like inaccessible school settings, insufficient training for teachers, and social stigma still impede impaired pupils' academic advancement (Kremte, 2019). The purpose of this study is to investigate the variables affecting the dropout rates of pupils with disabilities in Malawi's Dedza District.

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### **2. Literature Review :**

#### ***2.1 Global Perspectives on Disability and Education***

Around the world, pupils with disabilities face a number of challenges in their educational journeys, including discrimination, a lack of resources, and teachers who are not appropriately educated (Braddock & Parish, 2002). According to the Salamanca Statement (1994), inclusive education is a crucial strategy for ensuring equitable educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Despite these international commitments, disabled pupils still drop out at high rates, particularly in low-income countries (UNESCO, 2017).

#### ***2.2 Regional Challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa***

In sub-Saharan Africa, the high dropout rate among impaired children is caused by poverty, a lack of inclusive infrastructure, and inadequate teacher preparation (Mateusi, 2011). According to research from Zambia and Lesotho, despite the existence of inclusive education regulations, their effective implementation is hindered by financial and logistical constraints (Shale, 2015).

#### ***2.3 Factors Contributing to Dropout Rates in Malawi***

Numerous factors contribute to Malawi's high dropout rates among pupils with disabilities. School-related problems, such as crowded classrooms, inadequate equipment, and a lack of specialised teaching resources, have a significant impact on the retention of pupils with disabilities (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2015). Teachers are associated with negative attitudes towards pupils with disabilities and a lack of training in inclusive education (Mosia,

2017). Additionally, social stigma and financial hardships are two significant barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from pursuing higher education (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

#### **2.4 Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in several key educational theories that help explain the dropout rates among disabled pupils.

According to Oliver's (1996) Social Model of Disability, disability is a social construct influenced by environmental and attitudinal constraints rather than just an individual condition. The traditional medical viewpoint, which views disability as a problem that has to be resolved, is challenged by this paradigm. It makes the case that society should change by getting rid of obstacles that keep disabled kids from getting an education, like inaccessible facilities and prejudiced views. The Social Model of Disability, as it applies to this study, emphasises how social attitudes and school policies can help or hurt the academic success of impaired pupils in Dedza District.

Another relevant theory that highlights the importance of different environmental systems in shaping a child's development is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This hypothesis divides these systems into micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems. For instance, the microsystem is made up of direct influences like family and teachers, whereas the macrosystem is made up of social attitudes and policies that shape educational experiences. The interplay between these systems significantly affects the dropout rates of pupils with disabilities since children from inclusive schools and supportive family environments are more likely to complete their education.

This study is also relevant to Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (Piaget, 1962), which describes how cognitive capacities evolve in phases and affects how children interpret and interact with educational resources. Piaget asserts that children go through distinct developmental phases and that people with impairments may encounter delays in cognitive processing, which can affect their capacity for successful learning. Pupils with disabilities may experience academic difficulties, disengagement, and eventual dropout if schools do not offer the proper learning support. This idea emphasises the necessity of specialised educational interventions that take into account the cognitive capacities of pupils with disabilities.

Ultimately, UNESCO (2016) endorses the inclusive education philosophy, which emphasises the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. According to this method, inclusive education benefits all pupils by fostering diversity and accommodating their different learning needs through specialist teaching methods, curriculum modifications, and accessible facilities. Implementing inclusive education effectively requires funding, legislative backing, and teacher preparation to ensure that children with disabilities have equitable access to education.

#### **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of the study provides a systematic understanding of the variables influencing the dropout rates of pupils with impairments. By dividing these variables into independent, dependent, and control variables, it offers an illustration of how these variables interact.

Examples of independent variables include social, educational, and personal factors. School-based factors that significantly impact the learning of pupils with disabilities include infrastructure, teacher preparation, and the availability of educational resources (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2015). Self-esteem, cognitive development, and the type of impairment are individual qualities that influence pupils' ability to manage academic commitments (Kremte, 2019). Social factors including stigma, family support, and the implementation of policies all have a big impact on how long underprivileged pupils stay in school (Croninger & Lee, 2001).

Dedza District primary school dropout rates for pupils with disabilities are the study's dependent variable. According to the World Bank and WHO (2011), this variable measures the extent to which kids with disabilities leave school before completing their primary education due to the challenges posed by the independent factors.

Subsequently, examples of control factors are socioeconomic status, parental education, age, and gender. Since they may affect the relationship between independent and dependent variables, these factors must be carefully considered while evaluating data. For instance, pupils from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may find it easier to obtain resources for assistive learning and family support, which would reduce their likelihood of dropping out (UNESCO, 2017).

Through the organisation of these variables under a conceptual framework, this study finds significant factors that contribute to school dropout among children with disabilities. This provides a starting point for developing targeted treatments that will enhance retention in school.

#### **2.6 Research Gap**

Despite numerous studies on inclusive education and disability, there remains a significant gap in research focusing specifically on the dropout rates of disabled pupils in Malawi, particularly in Dedza District. Prior studies have primarily focused on general challenges to education for children with disabilities, failing to provide a targeted, thorough understanding of the unique challenges faced by challenged pupils in this area. Since different districts have different socioeconomic conditions, cultural values, and ways of implementing policies, a more targeted approach is necessary. Moreover, while global studies identify the most effective approaches to inclusive education, there is a lack of empirical evidence assessing these strategies' applicability in Malawi. Addressing this gap will provide critical insights that can inform more effective interventions to improve educational retention among disabled pupils in Dedza District.

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### **3. Research Methodology :**

A quantitative research approach is used in this study to examine the variables affecting the dropout rates of pupils with disabilities in the Dedza District. Pupils with disabilities, parents, teachers, and administrators were given structured questionnaires to complete to gather data.

### 3.1 Study Area and Population

The study focused on four special schools and six public primary schools in the Dedza District. 40 teachers, 30 pupils with disabilities, 20 parents, and 10 education officials were among the participants.

### 3.2 Sampling Technique

A stratified random selection method was used to ensure representativeness across all school types (Creswell, 2014). This strategy allowed for equitable representation of teachers, pupils, and school administrators involved in inclusive education.

### 3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Structured questionnaires with Likert-scale questions were used to get data on how people felt about inclusive education. To find important trends and connections between the study variables, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS (Field, 2013).

## 4. Research Findings and Interpretation :

### 4.1 Teacher-Related Factors

An important part of this study was assessing how teacher-related factors affected the dropout rates of pupils with disabilities. Table 1 displays the findings of teachers' assessments of their training and readiness for inclusive education. These findings demonstrate that a significant number of teachers lack the skills and knowledge required to support pupils with disabilities in an inclusive classroom. The lack of specific training limits their ability to employ adaptive teaching strategies tailored to the different needs of pupils with disabilities. Without these accommodations, pupils with disabilities may struggle to keep up in class, which may lead to disengagement and eventual dropout.

**Table 1: Summary of Teacher-Related Factors**

Factor	Findings
<b>Teacher Training in Inclusive Education</b>	55% of teachers reported not having specialized training, indicating a lack of preparedness to support pupils with disabilities.
<b>Use of Specialized Teaching Methods</b>	52.5% of teachers disagreed that they use specialized teaching strategies, affecting the learning experience of pupils with disabilities.
<b>Support from School Administration</b>	65% of teachers reported insufficient support from the school administration in implementing inclusive education practices.
<b>Regular Assessment &amp; Feedback</b>	55% of teachers disagreed that they regularly assess and provide feedback to pupils with disabilities.

### 4.2 School Infrastructure and Accessibility

One important factor influencing pupils with disabilities' attendance at school is the availability of accessible infrastructure. Findings on the accessibility of school infrastructure are shown in Table 2. The results show that the dropout rates of pupils with disabilities in Dedza District are largely caused by poor school infrastructure. The majority of respondents (75%) stated that it was challenging for pupils with mobility challenges to attend school on a daily basis because basic school amenities including classrooms, restrooms, and paths were inaccessible. Furthermore, 80% of respondents emphasised how the absence of assistive technology, such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, and braille materials, makes it more difficult for pupils who are blind or hard of hearing to learn. Additionally, the study revealed that half of the education authorities believed the teacher-to-student ratio was unmanageable, indicating that teachers are unable to adequately serve pupils with special needs in overcrowded classes. Additionally, a sizable portion of parents (75%) and pupils (73%) stated that there was a lack of learning resources specifically designed for pupils with disabilities, which further limited their access to high-quality education. In order to foster a more inclusive learning environment and lower dropout rates among pupils with disabilities, our findings highlight the critical need for enhanced school infrastructure, assistive resources, and specialised learning materials.

**Table 2: Summary of School Infrastructure Factors**

Factor	Findings
<b>Accessibility of School Facilities</b>	75% of respondents reported that classrooms, toilets, and pathways were not accessible to pupils with disabilities.
<b>Availability of Assistive Devices</b>	80% of respondents indicated that schools lacked essential assistive devices like braille, hearing aids, and wheelchairs.
<b>Teacher-Student Ratio</b>	50% of education officials disagreed that the teacher-student ratio was manageable for effective teaching of pupils with disabilities.
<b>Availability of Learning Materials</b>	73% of pupils and 75% of parents reported a lack of sufficient learning materials for pupils with disabilities.

### 4.3 Societal and Parental Support

The way society perceives children with disabilities and the importance of parental involvement were also examined. Table 3 illustrates the findings on parents' perceptions of the level of support provided to their children. The importance of social and familial support in retaining pupils with disabilities in school is emphasised in the article. According to half of the parents surveyed, their children did not receive enough support from society and schools, indicating a lack of inclusive policies at the institutional and community levels. When parents feel inadequately supported, they may find it harder to advocate for their children's educational requirements, which could lead to higher dropout rates.

**Table 3: Summary of Societal and Parental Support Factors**

Factor	Findings
<b>Parental Support for Education</b>	50% of parents believed their children did not receive adequate support from schools and society.
<b>Societal Attitudes</b>	45% of teachers and 50% of parents felt that negative societal attitudes contributed to student dropout rates.
<b>Community Involvement</b>	60% of education officials reported that community initiatives aimed at supporting pupils with disabilities were insufficient.
<b>Financial Constraints</b>	55% of parents indicated that financial challenges affected their ability to support their children's education.

## 5. Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations :

### 5.1 Discussion

The findings of this study can be interpreted in relation to key theoretical frameworks that explain the dropout rates among pupils with disabilities. According to the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1996), the main reason why people with disabilities are excluded is not personal limitations but rather social challenges. This approach is supported by the study's findings, which showed that social stigma, insufficient teacher preparation, and a lack of accessible school facilities were the main causes of dropout rates. Pupils with disabilities are forced out of the educational system due to an exclusionary climate created by schools that do not have ramps, assistive learning resources, or qualified teachers.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which highlights the influence of numerous environmental systems on a child's education, provides more credence to these findings. Parents and teachers make up a student's microsystem, which mostly determines their academic success. The study found that a lack of family support and insufficient teacher preparation had a negative effect on pupils' ability to continue their education. At the mesosystem level, ineffective collaboration between families, schools, and communities also led to insufficient support networks for pupils with disabilities. At the macrosystem level, weak government policy execution and broader cultural attitudes exacerbated dropout rates.

Furthermore, the Inclusive Education Theory (UNESCO, 2016) advocates for curriculum, teaching strategies, and infrastructure adaptation to serve all pupils. Despite the existence of policy frameworks that promote inclusive education, the study's results demonstrate that implementation is still deficient. Schools lack the necessary resources to accommodate pupils with impairments, and educators lack training in inclusive teaching methods. The gap between policy and practice further legitimises educational exclusion, which is in opposition to the principles of inclusive education theory.

### 5.2 Conclusion

According to this study, the primary reasons for the high dropout rates among children with disabilities in Dedza District include inadequate teacher preparation, poor educational facilities, and a lack of family and societal support. To address such problems, a multifaceted strategy involving community sensitisation, regulatory changes, and resource allocation is required.

The findings show that improving teacher preparation programs is crucial to ensuring that teachers are equipped to address the needs of pupils with disabilities. In addition, enhancing school facilities like assistive technology and accessible classrooms would create a more inclusive learning environment. Improving parental involvement and raising public awareness of the benefits of inclusive education are more ways to lessen stigma and encourage student retention. Legislative bodies, teachers, communities, and families must work together to implement effective solutions that will improve the educational experiences of children with disabilities and reduce dropout rates in Dedza District.

### 5.3 Recommendations

1. **Enhanced Teacher Training:** The Ministry of Education should implement targeted professional development programs to equip teachers with the skills necessary for inclusive education.
2. **Infrastructure Improvement:** Schools should be provided with funding to construct accessible classrooms, ramps, and other essential facilities to accommodate pupils with disabilities.
3. **Community Sensitization Programs:** Awareness campaigns should be conducted to challenge negative societal perceptions and encourage parental involvement in supporting children with disabilities.
4. **Policy Implementation:** The government should enforce existing inclusive education policies to ensure that schools are held accountable for providing quality education to pupils with disabilities.

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