



An Investigation on the Factors that Influence School Dropout among Students: A Case of Chilanga Secondary School in Balaka District, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

School dropout is a significant factor affecting educational attainment, particularly in poor countries like Malawi. This study investigates the causes of school dropouts at Chilanga Secondary School in the Balaka District. The study employs a descriptive research approach to assess the institutional, cultural, and economic factors influencing student retention. Research indicates that poverty, early marriage, gender-based discrimination, inadequate school facilities, and systemic problems in the educational system are the main causes of dropout rates. The article recommends targeted actions like institutional improvements, community engagement, and legislative measures to mitigate this situation and raise student retention rates.

Keywords: School dropout, education, socioeconomic factors, Malawi, Chilanga Secondary School

1. Introduction

Education is crucial for both individual and national development, even if school dropout is still a major issue in many developing countries. In Malawi, where several barriers prevent rural students from completing their secondary education, the issue is particularly severe. The extremely high dropout rates at Chilanga Secondary School in Balaka District continue to jeopardise the prospects of the children as well as the development of the community. Investigating the factors influencing Chilanga Secondary School dropout rates, identifying significant problems, and making suggestions to improve student retention are the goals of this study.

2. Literature Review

The causes of school dropout vary by region, making it a worldwide problem. High dropout rates in Sub-Saharan Africa are mostly caused by cultural customs, early marriages, and financial limitations (UNESCO, 2022). According to studies conducted in Kenya and Uganda, child labour and poverty are the main reasons why students drop out of school, highlighting the financial difficulties that families experience (Mutuku et al., 2021; Nambalirwa & Juma, 2019). On the other hand, high-income nations like the US and the UK state that bullying, insecure home circumstances, and academic disengagement are the main causes of school dropout (Smith & McDowell, 2018).

Girls in Malawi have a disproportionately high dropout rate because of factors like early pregnancy, gender-based abuse, and the preference for marriage over school (Katengeza & Ngwira, 2020). According to the Ministry of Education (2021), the issue is made worse by institutional challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of trained teachers, and insufficient instructional supplies. Furthermore, girls who encounter security concerns on their route to school are discouraged from attending due to the long commutes to school in rural areas (UNESCO, 2022).

Empirical research also highlights the interplay between socioeconomic and cultural factors. For instance, Alemu and Tadesse (2019) found that Ethiopia's dropout rates were significantly influenced by cultural norms and economic constraints. Similarly, Mushi and Mtenzi's (2020) Tanzanian study discovered that limited parental involvement and poor school infrastructure were major contributors to student dropout. These findings are in line with studies from Malawi that show that students from low-income families are more likely to drop out when they face financial challenges and competing financial demands (Katengeza & Ngwira, 2020).

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by multiple theoretical perspectives that explain the factors contributing to school dropout.

2.1.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's (1943) theory states that before pursuing more ambitious objectives like education, people should take care of their basic physiological and safety needs. In Malawi, students from low-income households often struggle to meet these needs, which contributes to a higher dropout rate. Food insecurity, housing shortages, and dangerous school circumstances discourage students from completing their education (Ministry of Education, 2021).

2.1.2 Human Capital Theory

The Human Capital Theory, developed by Becker in 1964, states that education improves a person's prospects of financial success in the future. In low-income households, however, students leave school because they feel that child work will benefit them more in the short term than education will in the long run (World Bank, 2020). This explanation explains the higher dropout rates among students from economically disadvantaged homes.

2.1.3 Social Capital Theory

The importance of social networks in achieving educational goals is highlighted by Coleman's (1988) Social Capital Theory. Strong networks of family and community support promote student retention, while their absence raises the chance of dropout. Communities in Malawi that place a high value on girls' early marriage and household duties reduce social support for schooling, which raises dropout rates (UNESCO, 2022).

2.1.4 Push and Pull Theory

According to Rumberger and Lim (2008), pull factors (external responsibilities) and push factors (negative school experiences) are the main causes of student dropout. Pull factors include financial strains, familial responsibilities, and social expectations, whereas push factors include subpar academic achievement, a lack of teacher assistance, and stress associated to school. In Malawi, students are frequently taken out of school to help with early marriage, family chores, or agricultural work (UNICEF, 2021).

2.2 Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing school dropout rates by breaking down dropout determinants into independent, dependent, and intervening variables. The independent variables are socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional factors, all of which significantly affect dropout rates. These components serve as the foundation for examining the reasons for early school exits among youngsters.

Socioeconomic factors, including poverty, parental education levels, and employment status, have a significant impact on a student's ability to continue their education. According to Katengeza & Ngwira (2020), these socioeconomic factors are often the cause of high dropout rates. Cultural issues such as gender roles, early marriages, and prevailing community standards also contribute to the dropout phenomenon; these expectations put women at greater risk (UNESCO, 2022). According to the Ministry of Education (2021), institutional problems such as inadequate school facilities, teacher availability, and resource distribution also have a significant impact on students' academic experiences and likelihood of dropping out.

The study's dependent variable is Chilanga Secondary School's school dropout rate. This rate is directly influenced by the social, cultural, and institutional elements discussed earlier. By examining their effects, the study aims to assess how these independent variables collectively affect students' decisions to drop out of school.

Intervening variables, such as non-governmental interventions, governmental policies, and community support, are crucial for mediating the effects of the independent components. Programs like school nutrition efforts, mentorship programs, and scholarships help lower dropout rates by addressing some of the underlying causes. These programs provide students with the essential support they require to get beyond socioeconomic barriers and continue their education, according to the World Bank (2020).

2.3 Research Gap

Although many studies examined the factors influencing school dropout rates, there is still a lack of localised research that focused solely on Chilanga Secondary School and the greater Balaka District. UNESCO, 2022; Katengeza & Ngwira, 2020) Most of the currently published literature addresses dropout rates at the national or regional level, sometimes neglecting the unique socioeconomic and cultural challenges that each community faces. Additionally, despite previous research focusing on financial constraints and cultural variables, little is known about the direct effects of institutional weaknesses, such as inefficient administrative procedures and inadequate student support networks, on dropout rates in Malawi. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the current intervention strategies is unknown, which highlights the need for further research into tailored solutions that address problems specific to different schools. This study, therefore, fills a critical gap by providing localized insights into dropout determinants and recommending targeted interventions for Chilanga Secondary School.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive research approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing school dropout at Chilanga Secondary School. Participants in the study include students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. A purposive sample strategy was used to select 150 participants, including 60 children, 40 teachers, 35 parents, and 15 educational administrators.

Primary and secondary data sources were integrated for this study through the use of structured questionnaires and school records. Parents, teachers, school administrators and students were given standardised questionnaires to complete to collect firsthand data on the factors impacting school dropout rates. Additionally, school records provided valuable secondary data on academic performance, dropout rates, and student demographics. This dual technique ensured a complete dataset, allowing for a thorough analysis of the dropout causes from many perspectives. Secondary data from school records was added to the primary data gathered through questionnaires to bolster the findings and increase the study's dependability (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), which offered powerful capabilities for data processing and interpretation, was used to analyse the quantitative data that had been gathered. The most important dropout determinants were compiled and identified using descriptive data, such as frequencies and percentages. These statistical methods aided in finding patterns among the variables and deriving insightful inferences from the data (Field, 2018). Ethical guidelines were closely followed for the entire study, including getting participants' informed consent and protecting the privacy of their answers and academic records. The study preserved the integrity of the research process and safeguarded the participants' rights by adhering to these ethical principles (Silverman, 2017).

4. Research Findings and Interpretation

4.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data were collected from 150 respondents, including students, teachers, parents, and school administrators. The findings are presented based on the research objectives.

4.1.1 Socio-Economic Factors and School Dropout

Factor	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Financial difficulties force students to drop out	41.7	33.3	16.7	8.3
Family income level affects school attendance	46.7	30	15	8.3
High cost of education materials leads to dropout	43.3	33.3	13.3	10
Transportation costs impact school attendance	46.7	36.6	10	6.7

These findings imply that one of the main factors influencing dropout rates is financial hardship. Low-income students have a harder time paying for transportation, uniforms, and tuition, which makes them more likely to drop out of school.

4.1.2 Cultural Influences on School Dropout

Cultural Factor	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Early marriage is a major cause of dropout	50	33.3	10	6.7
Initiation ceremonies disrupt schooling	46.7	36.7	11.7	5
Gender norms discourage girls' education	50	33.3	11.7	5
Parental preference for marriage over education	46.7	36.7	11.7	5

According to the findings, cultural practices like initiation ceremonies and early marriages have a major impact on school dropout rates, especially for female students.

4.1.3 Institutional Barriers to Student Retention

Institutional Factor	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
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Overcrowded classrooms reduce student engagement	36.7	46.7	13.3	3.3
Poor infrastructure contributes to dropout	33.3	50	13.3	3.3
Lack of teachers affects student motivation	41.7	46.7	8.3	3.3
Weak school administration fails to retain students	40	50	8.3	1.7

Findings suggest that inadequate school infrastructure, poor teacher-student ratios, and weak school management contribute significantly to dropout rates.

4.1.4 Recommendations for Reducing School Dropout Rates

Recommendation	Student Agreement (%)	Teacher Agreement (%)
Scholarships and Financial Assistance	86.70%	N/A
Vocational Training Programs	N/A	85%

According to the survey, some of the most effective strategies for reducing dropout rates include financial assistance programs, improvements to the infrastructure, and vocational training. Table 4 shows that 86.7% of students agreed or strongly agreed that scholarships and financial aid will help lower dropout rates. Similarly, 85% of educators supported the creation of vocational training programs to provide students with alternative paths to success.

5. Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion

Objective 1: To examine the socio-economic factors influencing school dropout

The study's findings indicate that the primary reason for school dropouts at Chilanga Secondary School is still financial constraints. Low-income students usually prioritise their immediate financial needs over their education, according to Becker's (1964) Human Capital Theory. Many respondents cited the difficulty to afford educational materials, high tuition costs, and transportation costs as the primary obstacles to students continuing their education. This is in line with past studies that have shown socioeconomic disparities significantly impact Malawian school attendance, such as Katengeza and Ngwira (2020).

Objective 2: To explore the cultural factors contributing to school dropout

According to the study, cultural norms—specifically, early marriages and initiation ceremonies—are a significant contributor to rising dropout rates, particularly for female students. According to the Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988), many parents prioritise marriage over schooling, illustrating how social norms influence people's choices. According to the findings, social expectations that prioritise household duties above academic success cause a large number of girls to drop out of school. This result is in line with UNICEF's (2021) assertion that Malawi's gender norms continue to disadvantage female students.

Objective 3: To assess the institutional challenges affecting student retention

It was found that the main causes of school dropout were institutional issues such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) states that in order for students to thrive, they need a supportive learning environment; unfortunately, Chilanga Secondary School's subpar conditions make this impossible. According to the responders, unhygienic facilities, inadequate teaching tools, and bad school administration all have a detrimental effect on student engagement and retention. This corroborates the findings of the Ministry of Education (2021), which concluded that a lack of infrastructure is one of the main issues facing Malawi's educational system.

Objective 4: To determine strategies for improving student retention

The article identifies several strategies for reducing dropout rates, including financial aid programs, community awareness efforts, and legislative improvements. Respondents emphasised the need for additional government funding, school nutrition programs, and scholarships to help at-risk students. Additionally, encouraging education via community service aligns with Social Capital Theory, which highlights the importance of social networks for academic success. Changes in policy, such as stricter enforcement of the ban on underage marriage, may also significantly help increase retention rates (World Bank, 2020).

5.2 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that institutional, cultural, and socioeconomic factors have a major impact on Chilanga Secondary School dropout rates (Katengeza & Ngwira, 2020). Since children from low-income families find it difficult to pay for tuition, school supplies, and transportation, financial limitations continue to be the most important factor (UNESCO, 2022). Students are forced to drop out of school in order to support their families because many families place a higher priority on short-term financial survival than on long-term educational gains (Becker, 1964). Additionally, food insecurity is made worse by economic hardship, which has an impact on students' focus and involvement in their studies (World Bank, 2020). High dropout rates, particularly for girls, are also a result of cultural traditions, particularly early marriages and initiation rites (UNICEF, 2021). Girls' chances for academic success and financial independence are restricted by societal norms that frequently place a higher priority on household duties than on education (Coleman, 1988).

Another significant factor contributing to rising dropout rates is institutional issues, such as overcrowded classrooms, poor school facilities, and a teacher shortage (Ministry of Education, 2021). Lack of necessary resources makes it difficult for schools to create a positive learning environment, which results in low academic achievement and disengagement (Maslow, 1943). Addressing the requirements of at-risk students is challenging due to weak administrative systems and a lack of student support services, which further lower retention rates (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

5.3 Recommendations

1. **Financial Assistance Programs:** Government and NGOs should expand bursary schemes and school feeding programs to support students from low-income households.
2. **Community Awareness Campaigns:** Stakeholders should engage community leaders to discourage harmful cultural practices, such as early marriages and initiation ceremonies.
3. **Improved School Infrastructure:** The government should invest in building more classrooms, hiring qualified teachers, and improving sanitation facilities.
4. **Policy Reforms:** Enforcing mandatory secondary education laws and providing incentives for parents to keep their children in school can help reduce dropout rates.
5. **School-Based Counseling Programs:** Establishing mentorship and counseling programs can provide students with the motivation and support needed to complete their education.

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