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Investigating Barriers Faced by Eligible Learners in Accessing Government Bursary Programs: A Qualitative Study of Chitipa Education District, Malawi

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ABSTRACT :

Access to education remains a critical determinant of socio-economic development and social mobility. In Malawi, government bursary programs have been established to support learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and promote equitable access to secondary education. Despite these interventions, many eligible learners continue to face challenges in accessing bursary support. This qualitative study explored the barriers faced by eligible learners in accessing government bursary programs in Chitipa Education District, Malawi. Guided by Human Capital Theory, Social Reproduction Theory, and Equity Theory, the study adopted a phenomenological research design to understand participants' lived experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving learners, teachers, parents, and education officials. Thematic analysis revealed five major barriers: limited awareness and information dissemination, socio-economic constraints, administrative and bureaucratic challenges, institutional weaknesses, and socio-cultural factors. The findings suggest that while bursary programs have the potential to improve educational access, their effectiveness is undermined by systemic and contextual challenges. The study recommends strengthening awareness campaigns, simplifying application procedures, improving transparency, and enhancing school-level support mechanisms to ensure equitable access to bursary opportunities.

Keywords: Educational equity, bursary programs, educational access, secondary education, qualitative research, Malawi, Chitipa District

Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of socio-economic transformation. Globally, investments in education contribute significantly to poverty reduction, economic growth, and social development. In developing countries such as Malawi, education remains central to national development strategies and human capital development initiatives.

The Government of Malawi has implemented various educational support mechanisms, including bursary programs, to increase access to secondary education among vulnerable learners. These programs are intended to alleviate financial barriers that prevent disadvantaged students from enrolling in or completing their education.

However, evidence suggests that many learners who qualify for bursary support continue to experience challenges in accessing these opportunities. Chitipa District, one of Malawi's most rural and economically disadvantaged districts, presents a unique context for examining these challenges. Despite the availability of government bursaries, many learners remain excluded from support due to a combination of socio-economic, institutional, and cultural factors. Understanding these barriers is essential for developing effective interventions that promote equitable educational access.

This study therefore sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of learners and other stakeholders regarding barriers to accessing government bursary programs in Chitipa Education District.

Literature Review

Existing literature demonstrates that financial aid programs significantly improve educational participation and retention among vulnerable learners. UNESCO (2020) argues that bursaries and scholarships are critical tools for reducing educational inequalities and promoting inclusive education.

Studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa identify several barriers affecting bursary access. Ouma and Gatimu (2019) found that information asymmetry significantly reduces application rates among eligible learners in Kenya. Similarly, Omotayo (2021) reported that complex application procedures discourage many potential beneficiaries in Nigeria. Research from Tanzania and Ethiopia highlights issues of poor communication, favoritism, and lack of transparency in bursary allocation processes.

In Malawi, poverty remains a major obstacle to educational participation. Previous studies indicate that many households struggle to meet both direct and indirect educational costs, including transportation, uniforms, and application-related expenses. Cultural practices, gender norms, and limited institutional capacity further complicate access to educational support programs.

Despite growing scholarship on educational financing, there remains limited district-specific research examining bursary access in remote areas such as Chitipa. This study contributes to filling this gap by providing localized qualitative evidence on barriers experienced by eligible learners.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives.

Human Capital Theory posits that investments in education contribute to individual productivity and national economic development. Government bursary programs can therefore be understood as investments aimed at increasing educational attainment among disadvantaged populations.

Social Reproduction Theory explains how social inequalities persist across generations through unequal access to economic, social, and cultural resources. The theory helps explain why vulnerable learners may remain excluded from bursary opportunities despite the existence of support mechanisms.

Equity Theory emphasizes fairness in resource allocation and highlights the importance of transparency and accountability in educational support systems. Perceived inequities in bursary allocation can reduce trust and discourage participation among eligible learners.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore participants' lived experiences regarding access to government bursary programs. The phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of the meanings participants attached to their experiences.

The study was conducted in Chitipa Education District, a predominantly rural district characterized by high poverty levels and limited educational infrastructure. Participants included learners, parents, teachers, head teachers, and district education officials selected through purposive sampling.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' awareness of bursary programs, application experiences, and perceptions of barriers to access. Focus group discussions provided opportunities for collective reflection and validation of emerging themes.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were coded, categorized, and organized into themes representing major barriers affecting bursary access. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, and maintenance of an audit trail.

Findings and Discussion

Limited Awareness and Information Dissemination

- The findings revealed that many eligible learners lacked adequate information about available bursary opportunities. Participants reported receiving information late or not receiving it at all. In several schools, bursary announcements were communicated through informal channels that failed to reach all eligible learners.
- These findings support previous studies indicating that information asymmetry remains a major barrier to educational support programs. Limited awareness particularly affected learners from remote communities who had restricted access to communication networks.

Socio-Economic Constraints

- Participants consistently identified poverty as a significant barrier. Although bursaries are intended to support financially disadvantaged learners, many families lacked resources to cover application-related expenses such as transportation, photocopying, and documentation fees.
- Parents described situations where immediate household needs took precedence over educational pursuits. Learners from low-income households often struggled to obtain the necessary documentation required during the application process.
- These findings align with Human Capital Theory, which suggests that educational investment is constrained when economic resources are insufficient.

Administrative and Bureaucratic Challenges

- The study revealed numerous administrative barriers, including complex application procedures, unclear eligibility criteria, and delays in fund disbursement. Participants expressed frustration with lengthy bureaucratic processes and inconsistent communication from education authorities.
- Some learners reported submitting applications but never receiving feedback regarding their status. Others indicated that bursary funds arrived after significant delays, reducing their effectiveness in supporting educational continuity.
- Such challenges undermine confidence in the bursary system and reduce participation among potential applicants.

Institutional Weaknesses

- School-level support emerged as another important factor influencing bursary access. Many schools lacked trained guidance and counselling personnel

Recommendations

The study recommends:

- Strengthening awareness campaigns through schools, community meetings, and local media. Simplifying bursary application procedures and reducing documentation requirements.
- Improving transparency and accountability in bursary selection processes. Establishing school-based bursary support committees.
- Enhancing guidance and counselling services in secondary schools. Promoting community sensitization programs addressing gender-related barriers.
- Ensuring timely disbursement of bursary funds.

Conclusion

The study concludes that government bursary programmes have the potential to improve equitable access to secondary education; however, eligible learners in Chitipa Education District continue to encounter barriers including limited awareness, poverty, administrative inefficiencies, institutional weaknesses, and socio-cultural constraints. Addressing these challenges requires improved awareness campaigns, transparent selection procedures, simplified application processes, and strengthened institutional support to ensure that bursary opportunities reach deserving learners (UNESCO, 2020; Ouma & Gatimu, 2019; Omotayo, 2021).

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