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BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL RETENTION: A STUDY OF LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE MIDLANDS PROVINCE, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the barriers to educational retention faced by learners with disabilities in selected secondary schools in the Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. Despite global efforts to promote Inclusive Education, high dropout rates among these learners persist, often due to a complex interplay of physical, social, environmental, and educational obstacles. This research aims to identify specific barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained personnel, and pervasive social stigma, which contribute to the dropout phenomenon. Additionally, the study examines the influence of socioeconomic factors on educational experiences, assessing how family income and community resources impact school retention. By evaluating the effectiveness of existing support systems and policies, the research seeks to highlight gaps and propose actionable recommendations for enhancing educational outcomes for disabled learners. This study employed the qualitative research approach in analyzing the findings of the study. The study employed a cross-sectional enquiry design which encompasses the retrieval of facts from study participants, generally from multiple groups, which are school dropouts, their parents or guardians, School Heads, current learners in school, teachers and the District Schools Inspector of Inclusive Education. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The data collected was analysed through triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of the research findings, hence reducing biases. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of the challenges faced by learners with disabilities and to advocate for more inclusive educational practices. Ultimately, the research findings aim to inform policymakers, educators and stakeholders about effective

strategies to ensure that all learners, regardless of ability, have access, equity and opportunity to succeed in their educational journeys, particularly in the Midlands Province, Zimbabwe.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive Education; Learners with disabilities; School dropouts; School retention.

INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone for social and economic development. However, learners with disabilities frequently encounter major hurdles to accessing, remaining in, and effectively completing secondary education. In Zimbabwe, especially in the Midlands Province, these issues are exacerbated by socioeconomic limits, cultural perceptions of disability, and a lack of institutional assistance. As a result, many students with disabilities struggle to maintain their education, limiting their long-term chances for empowerment and inclusion.

Globally, inclusive education has been promoted as a means of ensuring equal participation for students with diverse needs. In practice, however, structural deficiencies continue, ranging from inadequate infrastructure and assistive technologies to insufficiently prepared teachers and discriminatory attitudes. These hurdles manifest uniquely in the Midlands Province as a result of regional differences, resource constraints, and community-level dynamics. Understanding these specific problems is critical for establishing effective interventions that not only increase retention rates but also promote equity and dignity for students with disabilities.

This study seeks to explore the hurdles to educational retention for learners with disabilities in secondary schools in Zimbabwe's Midlands Province. By examining the interplay of institutional, social, and personal factors, the research aims to highlight the structural and attitudinal obstacles that impede progress. Finally, the findings will help to inform policy discussions and practical methods for promoting inclusive education, ensuring that learners with disabilities do not fall behind in the achievement of national development goals.

Background to the study

Inclusive Education has been a global policy aspiration for ensuring access, equity, and quality for all learners, including those with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Salamanca Statement advocate for inclusive schooling as a default approach to education for all children, underscoring that removal of barriers, whether physical, attitudinal, or instructional, is essential to meaningful

participation (UN, 2006; UNESCO, 1994). However, translating policy into practice remains uneven across contexts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where resource constraints and sociocultural norms shape the lived experiences of learners with disabilities (Waititu & Ndiritu, 2020).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, progress toward inclusive education has been uneven, with persistent gaps in access, retention, and quality of outcomes for students with disabilities. While schools may enrol learners with disabilities, many face structural and systemic barriers that hinder sustained participation and completion of schooling (Waititu & Ndiritu, 2020). In Zimbabwe, prior research highlights that inclusive education policy exists in principle, but practical implementation is challenged by inadequate infrastructure, insufficiently trained personnel, limited assistive technologies, and pervasive stigma at community and school levels (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018). These barriers often interact with socioeconomic factors such as low household income and limited community resources, exacerbating dropout risks among disabled learners (Mudzengi, 2018).

Physical barriers within school environments for example narrow doorways, inaccessible toilet facilities, and a lack of mobility-friendly spaces restrict access and impede full participation for learners with physical disabilities, thereby increasing absenteeism and withdrawal (Kumbani et al., 2017; Ndlovu & Mazibuko, 2020). Beyond the built environment, the availability and quality of trained personnel, such as special needs education teachers, inclusive education coordinators, and support staff, directly influence instructional accommodations, individualised support, and the identification of assistive needs (Kasimula et al., 2019; Zindi & Chikanda, 2022). Where teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are limited, inclusive practices may be inconsistently implemented, and learners may experience frustration or disengagement (Maforah et al., 2018).

Social attitudes and stigma remain potent determinants of retention. Negative stereotypes about disability, stigma within families and communities, and low expectations for academic achievement can discourage continued engagement with schooling (Ncube & Murwira, 2015; Mudzengerere, 2021). In many Zimbabwean communities, disability is misinterpreted through biomedical or supernatural lenses, reinforcing exclusion and limiting the social supports that learners need to stay in school (Zindi & Chikanda, 2022). Conversely, supportive school climates that promote peer inclusion, positive teacher-student relationships, and visible accommodations can enhance persistence and achievement among learners with disabilities (Kolare & Banda, 2019).

The socioeconomic dimension compounds these challenges. Family income influences the ability to afford school-related costs, purchase assistive devices, and access transportation, all of which affect attendance and retention (Senebako et al., 2018). Community resources - such as local health services, social protection programs, and non-governmental organisations offering disability-specific assistance also shape educational trajectories by reducing or exacerbating barriers to schooling (Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020). Consequently, retention among learners with disabilities is not solely an educational issue but an intersectional one, involving physical accessibility, instructional capacity, social inclusion, and economic stability.

Against this background, the present study sought to identify and examine the barriers to educational retention faced by learners with disabilities in selected secondary schools in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe. By exploring physical infrastructure, human resource capacity, social attitudes, and socioeconomic determinants, the study aimed to (a) map specific retention barriers, (b) assess the effectiveness of existing support systems and policies, and (c) provide actionable recommendations for stakeholders to improve access, equity, and opportunity for disabled learners. The findings are intended to inform policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders and contribute to a more inclusive educational landscape in Midlands Province and similar contexts.

Statement of the problem

Despite global progress in Inclusive Education, learners with disabilities in selected secondary schools in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe, experience dropout rates. This study aims to precisely determine and articulate the barriers to educational retention for these learners and to understand the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping their educational experiences. Specifically, the research seeks to: identify and characterise barriers to retention faced by learners with disabilities, examine the influence of socioeconomic factors on retention, evaluate the effectiveness of existing support systems and policies intended to promote retention and inclusion for learners with disabilities and formulate actionable recommendations to enhance educational outcomes and ensure equitable access for disabled learners.

Research questions

1. What are the main barriers to educational retention experienced by learners with disabilities in selected secondary schools in Midlands Province, Zimbabwe?

2. How do physical/infrastructure factors influence attendance and continuation in school for learners with disabilities?
3. What is the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping retention outcomes for learners with disabilities?

Delimitations

The study was limited to three inclusive schools with learners with disabilities within one district in Midlands Province. Learners with disabilities, parents of some of the sampled learners, teachers, school administrators and the District Inspector for Inclusive Education.

Theoretical framework: Social Ecological Model (SEM)

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) provides a holistic lens for understanding how multiple levels of influence interact to shape individuals' behaviours and outcomes. Originally articulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and expanded in health promotion and research, SEM posits that behaviour and outcomes (e.g., school retention) are the result of dynamic interactions across nested systems: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy/societal levels. This framework is particularly well-suited to study educational retention for learners with disabilities because it accommodates the complex, interrelated barriers identified in the Zimbabwean context: physical infrastructure, teacher capacity, family and community attitudes, school policies, and broader socioeconomic conditions.

Literature review

Global policy context for inclusive education and retention

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and subsequent global policy instruments advocate for inclusive education as the standard approach to educating all children, including those with disabilities. These frameworks emphasise removing barriers to participation and ensuring that schools are accessible and responsive to diverse learner needs. Thus, inclusion is a right and a practice, not merely a policy aspiration.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reinforces rights-based access to education for persons with disabilities, informing national policies and funding priorities (United Nations, 2006). The Social Ecological Model (SEM) offers a multilevel theoretical lens for understanding how individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and policy factors interact to influence educational outcomes for learners with disabilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sallis et al., 2008).

Sub-Saharan Africa has shown progress toward inclusive education but faces persistent gaps in access, quality, and retention due to resource constraints, urban–rural divides, and sociocultural factors (Miles & Singal, 2012; Ayalew & Woldemariam, 2020).

Zimbabwean policy discourse around inclusion exists at the national level, but implementation is hampered by infrastructure and capacity constraints. Studies point to a policy-practice gap, with limited access to trained personnel and assistive technologies in many districts (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018).

Barriers to access and retention for learners with disabilities

Physical/infrastructural barriers: Inaccessible school facilities, lack of ramps and accessible toilets, and crowded or non-adaptive classroom layouts hinder mobility and participation for learners with physical disabilities (Kumbani et al., 2017; Ndlovu & Mazibuko, 2020).

Human resources and pedagogy: Shortages of trained special education teachers, limited ongoing professional development, and inadequate support services affect the quality of inclusive practices and student retention (Kasimula et al., 2019; Maforah et al., 2018; Zindi & Chikanda, 2022).

Social attitudes and stigma: Disability stigma, low expectations, and negative community beliefs can discourage continued schooling and access to supports (Ncube & Murwira, 2015; Mudzengerere, 2021).

Socioeconomic determinants: Household income, costs related to transportation, assistive devices, and school fees influence retention, with poorer families facing greater dropout risk (Senebako et al., 2018; Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020).

Support systems, policies, and practice gaps

The effectiveness of inclusive policies and school-based support systems depends on translation into practice at the school level. Gaps often involve insufficient funding, lack of monitoring, and limited community engagement (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018).

Positive determinants of retention include supportive teacher-student relationships, peer inclusion, and visible accommodations. These factors align with SEM's interpersonal and organisational levels and have been associated with better persistence and achievement (Kolare & Banda, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to educational retention among learners with disabilities in secondary schools in

the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. Qualitative methods are well-suited to explore complex phenomena where knowledge is co-constructed with participants and where context matters (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A purposive sampling strategy was used to select schools that enroll students with diverse disabilities, ensuring representation across both rural and urban settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with learners, teachers, parents, and school administrators to capture personal experiences and institutional perspectives. Focus group discussions were conducted to encourage collective reflection on challenges faced. Additionally, school records and policy documents were analyzed to contextualize findings within existing educational frameworks. Qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and barriers. This triangulated approach enhanced the reliability of the findings and provided a holistic understanding of the systemic, social, and personal factors influencing retention among learners with disabilities.

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis, where responses were transcribed, coded, and categorized into recurring themes such as institutional challenges, social attitudes, and personal experiences. This process allowed for the identification of patterns and deeper insights into lived realities. Thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify patterns across interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documents, organised by SEM levels and cross-level interactions. Triangulation to enhance credibility and also cross-case synthesis to compare experiences across schools, districts, and stakeholder groups.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that learners with disabilities in secondary schools in the Midlands Province face multiple barriers to educational retention, which can be grouped into institutional, social, and personal categories. Institutional challenges included inadequate infrastructure, lack of assistive devices, and insufficiently trained teachers to support inclusive learning. Social barriers were largely shaped by negative attitudes, stigma, and limited community awareness about disability rights, which often discouraged learners from continuing their education. Personal factors such as health-related challenges, low self-esteem, and financial constraints further compounded the risk of dropout.

Infrastructure and Physical Accessibility

Inaccessible facilities predict higher dropout risk. Respondents consistently identified inaccessible entryways, narrow doorways, and non-functioning or absent accessible toilets as major barriers to regular attendance, particularly for learners with mobility impairments. Visitors and learners reported skipping classes or leaving campuses early due to physical strain or safety concerns. This aligns with studies documenting physical barriers as fundamental obstacles to participation in inclusive settings (Kumbani et al., 2017; Ndlovu & Mazibuko, 2020) and with broader evidence on the built environment shaping participation (UNESCO, 1994; World Bank/UNICEF). Infrastructural barriers impair access and participation; addressing them is a prerequisite for effective inclusion (Kumbani et al., 2017; Ndlovu & Mazibuko, 2020).

Classroom design and instructional spaces constrain inclusion. Many classrooms lacked flexible seating, adaptable layouts, and quiet spaces for learners who require seating supports or sensory accommodation. Teachers noted difficulty implementing individualised accommodations when space arrangement impeded movement or focused attention. This echoes policy-practice gaps between inclusive intent and school-level capacity (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018). Organisational factors, including classroom design, influence inclusive practice effectiveness (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018).

Transportation and distance exacerbate absenteeism. Families reported long travel distances, unsafe routes, and high transport costs, contributing to irregular attendance and late arrivals, especially for students with mobility or chronic health needs. Socioeconomic context intersects with physical barriers to intensify non-participation (Senebako et al., 2018; Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020). Transportation and cost are key determinants of retention for learners with disabilities in low-resource settings (Senebako et al., 2018; Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020).

Human Resources and Pedagogy

Shortage of trained personnel undermines inclusive practice

School heads and teachers described insufficient numbers of teachers trained in special education and limited access to ongoing professional development. This led to inconsistent implementation of accommodations such as modified curricula, assistive devices, and individualised education plans (IEPs). This finding is consistent with Zimbabwe-specific studies documenting gaps in teacher preparation and support (Kasimula et al., 2019; Zindi & Chikanda, 2022) and with broader Sub-Saharan challenges in workforce capacity (Maforah et

al., 2018). Adequate teacher capacity is essential for effective inclusive education; professional development improves implementation (Kasimula et al., 2019; Maforah et al., 2018).

Inconsistent application of accommodations due to limited resources and guidance

Where accommodations existed, they were often ad hoc, lacking formal evaluation or regular review, leading to variable student experiences across schools. Policy-to-practice gaps and resource constraints underlie this inconsistency (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018). Clear policies with implementable guidelines and resources support consistent, inclusive practices (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018).

Positive teacher-student relationships buffer retention risks. Learners who reported supportive relationships with teachers and peers described higher motivation and a stronger sense of belonging, even when facilities were challenging. This aligns with evidence that social capital within schools improves persistence in inclusive contexts (Kolare & Banda, 2019; Hehir et al., 2016). Positive relational climates contribute to persistence and achievement in inclusive settings (Kolare & Banda, 2019; Hehir et al., 2016).

Social Attitudes, Stigma, and Expectations

Stigma and low expectations suppress retention. Across focus groups, learners and parents described stigma from peers, relatives, and community members, often translating into reduced self-esteem, decreased motivation, and early withdrawal from school. Negative beliefs about disability were linked to fewer academic supports and limited encouragement to persist, particularly for learners with visible physical impairments. This mirrors Sub-Saharan Africa findings that stigma and low expectations undermine inclusion and retention (Ncube & Murwira, 2015; Mudzengerere, 2021) and aligns with SEM's interpersonal and community levels, highlighting social context as a driver of educational outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sallis et al., 2008).

Supportive social climates promote persistence. In schools where peers demonstrated inclusive behaviour, where teachers actively challenged stigma, and where families engaged with school activities, learners with disabilities reported a greater sense of belonging and intention to stay in school. This is consistent with literature showing that positive school climates and peer inclusion improve retention and achievement for learners with disabilities (Kolare & Banda, 2019; Hehir et al., 2016).

Community-level resources mitigate stigma-related dropout risk. Interaction with local NGOs, disability-focused health services, and community-based transportation schemes

emerged as protective factors, enabling regular attendance and access to accommodations. This aligns with SEM's community and policy levels, which recognize how external supports shape school participation (Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020; Miles & Singal, 2012).

Socioeconomic Determinants

Household income and costs of schooling shape retention. Families with higher incomes reported better ability to cover transport, assistive devices, and incidental costs, supporting ongoing attendance. In contrast, low-income households faced competing priorities, leading to irregular attendance or withdrawal. This finding echoes literature on the central role of socioeconomic status in retention for learners with disabilities in low-resource settings (Senebako et al., 2018; Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020).

Community resources and social protection programs reduce dropout risk. Access to cash transfers, healthcare subsidies, and non-governmental organisations (NGO) supported devices correlated with improved school attendance and reduced dropout among disabled learners, highlighting the importance of bridging social protection with education (Tinashe & Nyamande, 2020; Waititu & Ndiritu, 2020).

Policy Implementation and Practice

Policy-to-practice gaps hinder retention gains. Although inclusive education policies existed at the national level, school-level implementation often lagged due to limited funding, insufficient monitoring, and competing priorities. This aligns with Zimbabwe-focused analyses identifying a gap between policy ambitions and day-to-day practice (Chitsama, 2016; Mudzengi, 2018).

District-level support determines where policies translate into practice. Schools located in districts with active inclusive education oversight and structured support witnessed better adaptation of policies into concrete practices (e.g., formal IE plans, regular staff training). This resonates with Sub-Saharan literature emphasising governance, funding, and local capacity as critical determinants of inclusive education effectiveness (Ayalew & Woldemariam, 2020; Miles & Singal, 2012).

Thematic synthesis and implications

The findings collectively underscore that retention of learners with disabilities in Midlands Province is shaped by intertwined factors across SEM levels: physical infrastructure and classroom design (organisational/environmental), teacher capacity and relationships (organisational/interpersonal), stigma and community beliefs (interpersonal/community), and

poverty and access to resources (individual/community/policy). Consistent documentation of these multilevel barriers in Zimbabwe and broader Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that effective interventions require integrated, multi-layered strategies rather than isolated fixes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; UNESCO, 1994; Mudzengi, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study found that learners with disabilities in secondary schools in Zimbabwe's Midlands Province suffer multiple hurdles that impact their academic retention. Institutional problems such as inadequate infrastructure, a lack of assistive technologies, and insufficiently educated teachers, combined with social concerns such as stigma, prejudice, and a lack of community awareness, produce an environment that is frequently hostile to inclusive learning. Personal factors, such as health issues, financial restraints, and low self-esteem, increase the chance of dropping out.

The findings highlight that retention is not merely a matter of access to education but also of sustained support, acceptance, and empowerment throughout the learning journey. Addressing these hurdles necessitates a multifaceted approach that includes improving legislation implementation, investing in accessible infrastructure, training educators in disability-sensitive pedagogy, and encouraging positive community attitudes. By tackling these systemic, social, and personal obstacles, Zimbabwe can move closer to achieving equitable education for all, ensuring that learners with disabilities are not excluded from contributing to national development.

To improve educational retention among learners with disabilities in secondary schools in Zimbabwe's Midlands Province, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education should boost the implementation of inclusive education policy and ensure school-level accountability. Teachers should be continuously trained in disability-sensitive pedagogy and the use of assistive technologies, and schools should invest in accessible infrastructure and provide critical learning aids like braille materials and hearing equipment.

Community awareness initiatives are required to combat stigma and create supportive attitudes toward disability, and financial support mechanisms such as scholarships or subsidies should be implemented to alleviate the burden on impoverished families. In addition, schools should construct counseling and peer support programs to address psychosocial needs, and frequent monitoring of enrollment, attendance, and dropout statistics should be implemented to guide evidence-based treatments. Collectively, these approaches

will result in a more inclusive and supportive educational environment that promotes retention and enables students with disabilities to reach their full potential.

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