Title

INVESTIGATING THE OUTCOMES OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR CHILDREN WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS AT MALINGUNDE SCHOOLS OF THE BLIND

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the outcomes of vocational training programmes for children with visual impairments at Malingunde Schools of the Blind in Lilongwe District, Malawi. Employing a qualitative, descriptive case study design, data were collected from 20 purposively sampled participants comprising 10 current learners, 5 graduates, and 5 instructors through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings reveal that the school offers a range of practically oriented vocational programmes including basket weaving, tailoring, cane chair making, gardening, poultry farming, and craft production, delivered through tactile and repetitive learning methods appropriate for learners with visual impairments. While participants reported significant personal benefits including increased confidence, independence, and self-efficacy challenges including limited funding, outdated equipment, and insufficient adaptive materials constrained programme effectiveness. Post-training outcomes were mixed: most graduates engaged in self-employment at low income levels, facing barriers of inadequate start-up capital, weak market linkages, and persistent societal stigma. The study recommends strengthened resource mobilisation, continuous professional development for instructors, structured post-training support systems, and community sensitisation to maximise vocational training impact.

KEYWORDS: vocational training, visual impairment, disability inclusion, Malingunde, Malawi, post-training outcomes, social model of disability

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Education is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of physical or mental ability. However, children with disabilities often face systemic barriers that limit their access to quality education and skill development opportunities. In response, vocational training programmes have emerged as critical interventions aimed at equipping children with disabilities with practical skills that enhance their employability, independence, and social integration. The Malingunde Schools of the Blind, located in Lilongwe District, Malawi, serves as one such institution committed to improving the future of visually impaired children through tailored vocational training programmes.

Globally, vocational training has been recognised as a key driver in empowering people with disabilities by equipping them with practical skills necessary for self-reliance and socio-economic participation *(ILO, 2017).* In line with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasises inclusive and equitable quality education, many countries have prioritised special education and vocational training for learners with disabilities *(UNESCO, 2020).* However, disparities in access, quality, and outcomes remain significant, particularly in low-income countries such as Malawi. Children with visual impairments in Malawi face compounded barriers including stigma, inadequate infrastructure, lack of teaching and learning resources, and limited post-school opportunities *(Kett, Lang & Trani, 2009).*

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although vocational training is widely regarded as a solution for enhancing the capabilities of learners with disabilities, evidence regarding its impact remains limited in the Malawian context. Anecdotal reports suggest that many graduates from special schools struggle to find employment or establish sustainable livelihoods, raising concerns about the quality, relevance, and support systems linked to vocational training *(Mphatso, 2020).* Systemic challenges — including limited government funding, lack of follow-up support, and societal discrimination — frequently undermine vocational training outcomes. At Malingunde Schools of the Blind, vocational training is integrated into the curriculum, yet there is limited documentation on how learners transition from school to work or how acquired skills translate into improved quality of life. This study addresses this knowledge gap.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

General Objective

- To investigate the outcomes of vocational training programmes for children with visual impairments at Malingunde Schools of the Blind.

Specific objectives

- to identify the types of vocational training programmes offered at the school
- To examine the perceived benefits and challenges of the training programmes among learners and teachers.
- To assess post-training outcomes in terms of employment, entrepreneurship, and social integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Types of Vocational Training Programmes

Globally, vocational training programmes for visually impaired learners have evolved to include diverse skill sets reflecting labour market demands. In developed countries such as Germany, Australia, and the United States, programmes include trades such as computer programming, braille transcription, assistive technology repair, and customer service, equipped with advanced assistive technologies and individualised support *(ILO, 2017).* The National Federation of the Blind in the US has developed specialised programmes focused on adaptive technologies, entrepreneurship, and advocacy, producing high employment and independence rates among graduates through emphasis on self-confidence, professional orientation, and post-training mentorship *(Bell & Mino, 2015).*

In Africa, vocational training for learners with disabilities remains highly variable. Most programmes concentrate in urban centres and focus on trades such as tailoring, cane

weaving, carpentry, poultry farming, and craft-making — chosen for feasibility rather than market alignment *(Chataika & McKenzie, 2016).* A review by *Kisanji (2018)* highlights that while South Africa has integrated more advanced vocational curricula, many African countries lag in curriculum adaptation, teacher training, and material access. In Malawi, training at institutions such as Malingunde includes tailoring, music, cane work, agriculture, and small-scale entrepreneurship *(Chitsulo, 2019).* Studies indicate that training content is frequently outdated and fails to adequately prepare learners for the dynamic job market *(Mphatso, 2020).*

Perceived Benefits and Challenges

In high-income countries, vocational training is widely perceived as beneficial in fostering independence, enhancing employability, and improving self-esteem among visually impaired learners, supported by individualised learning plans and continuous psychological and professional support *(UNESCO, 2020).* However, challenges include difficulties in adapting teaching strategies for diverse impairments, technological obsolescence, and changing labour demands *(ILO, 2017).*

In Africa, learners express appreciation for skill acquisition, increased self-worth, and limited economic independence, with improved learner confidence and community interaction reported in Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda *(Ndurumo, 2018).* Nonetheless, instructors and learners face multiple challenges: lack of instructional materials in braille or audio formats, poor infrastructure, and minimal professional development *(Chataika & McKenzie, 2016).* In Malawi, *Chitsulo (2019)* notes that students appreciate the empowerment derived from vocational trades, while *Mphatso (2020)* documents training on outdated equipment and the absence of feedback systems and post-training mentorship.

Post-Training Outcomes

In developed countries, strong post-training institutional support — including job placements, entrepreneurship grants, and accessible work environments — significantly enhances graduate employment rates and societal integration *(OECD, 2019).* Entrepreneurship is increasingly seen as a viable path, with success depending on access to startup capital, mentorship, and market access *(UNDP, 2018).* In Africa, employment and social integration outcomes are mixed: while some alumni create small businesses, many face systemic exclusion due to poverty, stigma, and inaccessible workplaces *(Chataika & McKenzie, 2016).* Integrated vocational training and microfinance schemes in Rwanda and Ethiopia have led to higher business sustainability, demonstrating the importance of linking training to broader socio-economic frameworks.

In Malawi, post-training outcomes remain a significant concern. While some Malingunde graduates start tailoring or poultry businesses, ventures often struggle due to lack of startup capital, poor market connections, and minimal community

support *(Mphatso, 2020).* Societal perception of disability still leans towards charity rather than empowerment, marginalising trained individuals *(Chitsulo, 2019).* Without systemic policy reform and targeted post-training interventions, outcomes will remain suboptimal.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two primary theories. The Social Model of Disability *(Oliver, 1990)* asserts that disability arises not from the impairment itself but from societal barriers — stigma, inaccessible infrastructure, and lack of opportunities. This framework underscores the importance of inclusive and accessible vocational training systems that address social and structural exclusion, not merely accommodation. Human Capital Theory *(Becker, 1993)* emphasises the role of education and training in increasing an individual's productivity and earning potential. For learners with disabilities, vocational training is an investment in human potential, crucial for improving employability and economic independence. Together, these frameworks guide the analysis of vocational training outcomes at Malingunde, highlighting both structural barriers and developmental opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing a descriptive case study design to explore, describe, and analyse vocational training outcomes at Malingunde Schools of the Blind within its real-life setting *(Yin, 2018).* This design enables examination of the programmes in detail — including structure, implementation, and perceived effectiveness — from multiple sources and perspectives *(Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995).* The qualitative approach allows for the exploration of complex, lived experiences of visually impaired learners and instructors, emphasising depth and contextual richness *(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Creswell, 2014).*

Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of three groups at Malingunde Schools of the Blind: current learners undergoing vocational training, graduates who completed training within the past five years, and instructors directly involved in vocational training delivery. Purposive sampling was employed to select 20 participants: 10 current learners, 5 graduates, and 5 instructors *(Patton, 2002).* This sample size was considered sufficient for data saturation in qualitative research *(Creswell & Poth, 2017).* Including multiple perspectives enabled triangulation and enhanced the validity of findings *(Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).*

Research Instruments and Data Collection

Two primary qualitative instruments were employed. Semi-structured interview guides were administered to

instructors and graduates, allowing a balance between structure and flexibility, enabling the researcher to cover predetermined topics while allowing new themes to emerge *(Kallio et al., 2016).* Focus group discussion (FGD) guides were used with current learners in groups of 4–5, moderated in Chichewa to ensure full participation, capturing peer dynamics and common experiences *(Nyumba et al., 2018).* All instruments were designed with the accessibility needs of visually impaired participants in mind, delivered orally with slower pacing and repetition of key questions. Instruments were pilot-tested with one instructor and two learners to assess clarity, timing, and contextual appropriateness *(van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).* Data were collected over two weeks at Malingunde Schools of the Blind, with all sessions audio-recorded with prior consent and supplemented by field notes.

Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

Data were analysed using thematic analysis *(Braun & Clarke, 2006)* through a six-step process: familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and final reporting. Manual coding was used to identify key ideas, with peer debriefing and member checking ensuring credibility and trustworthiness *(Nowell et al., 2017; Moser & Korstjens, 2018).* Ethical clearance was obtained from DMI–St John the Baptist University. All participants provided informed consent, with confidentiality assured through anonymisation and secure data handling. Participation was voluntary, with special accommodations ensuring visually impaired participants were fully informed and comfortable throughout *(Israel & Hay, 2006).*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate and Demographic Profile

All 20 targeted respondents participated fully in the study, yielding a 100% response rate, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of findings. Of the 20 respondents, 11 were female (55%) and 9 were male (45%), reflecting gender-inclusive access to vocational training. The largest age group was 20–29 years (40%, n = 8), comprising mainly graduates; 30% (n = 6) were below 20 years (current learners); 20% (n = 4) were aged 30–39 years; and 10% (n = 2) were 40 years or above (mainly instructors). This distribution captured experiences across different stages of training and post-training life.

Age Group

The Age Group Frequency for Below 20 Years is 6 and the percentage is 30, the Age Group Frequency for 20-29 years is 8 and the percentage is 40, the Age Group Frequency for 30-39 years is 4 and the percentage is 20 and the Age Group Frequency for above 40 years is 2 and the percentage is 10.

Types of Vocational Training Programmes Offered

Respondents confirmed that Malingunde Schools of the Blind offers a range of vocational training programmes designed to equip learners with practical and livelihood skills. These include basket weaving, tailoring, cane chair making, gardening, poultry farming, and basic craft production. Programmes emphasise tactile learning and repeated practice — methodologies appropriate for learners with visual impairments. One instructor noted that programmes like basket weaving and poultry farming help students learn through touch and sound, which is essential for independence. Graduates and current learners confirmed participation in these programmes and described them as practical and relevant to daily life, consistent with *Billet (2015)* and *McGrath (2018)* on practical vocational training for learners with disabilities.

Long-standing programmes such as cane chair making, reported to have been operational for over ten years, were noted to be more structured due to accumulated institutional experience. However, continuity was disrupted by limited funding and staffing, resulting in intermittent programme delivery and reduced opportunities for skill refinement, consistent with *McGrath et al. (2019)* on the importance of programme continuity for skill retention.

Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

Respondents highlighted significant benefits of vocational training, including improvements in confidence, independence, and self-efficacy. Participation in collaborative vocational activities also promoted responsibility, discipline, and social interaction. One graduate noted: after learning tailoring, I feel more independent and can make my own clothes without always asking for help. These benefits are consistent with *Sen's (2015)* documentation of vocational education improving empowerment among learners with disabilities and *Bandura's (1997)* self-efficacy theory, as applied in MAICC's empirical evidence on educational programme outcomes.

Challenges

Multiple challenges were identified. Learners and instructors reported inadequate funding, limited tools and adaptive materials, overcrowded classes, and insufficient practice time. One instructor acknowledged: we often lack enough braille materials or tools, which makes it hard to teach everyone effectively. Learners echoed this concern, noting that classes are sometimes too crowded and practice time is limited. Instructors also reported limited specialised training in vocational instruction for learners with visual impairments, consistent with *Chataika and McKenzie's (2016)* findings on teacher capacity gaps across African special education institutions.

Post-Training Outcomes

Employment and Entrepreneurship

Most graduates did not secure formal employment following training.

Instead, they engaged in self-employment activities such as tailoring, basket making, and small-scale farming. Income levels were generally low due to limited start-up capital and weak market access. One graduate reflected: I started a small basket weaving business at home, but without capital, it's hard to grow. This reflects *Mitra, Posarac and Vick's (2019)* documentation of limited employment opportunities for graduates with disabilities without systemic support, and *Mphatso's (2020)* findings on the entrepreneurial barriers facing Malingunde graduates.

Social Integration

Vocational training positively influenced social integration, improving communication, teamwork, and community acceptance. One learner shared: through group activities in poultry farming, I learned to work with others and now feel more accepted in my village. However, stigma toward persons with disabilities persisted in some communities, limiting full social inclusion. These findings are supported by *Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2018),* who document vocational participation as improving social inclusion, and *Oliver (1990),* who frames persistent stigma as a socially constructed barrier.

Barriers to Post-Training Success

Key barriers included lack of financial support, insufficient assistive devices, discrimination from employers and community members, weak post-training follow-up from the institution, and limited policy implementation for disability inclusion in employment. One graduate highlighted the absence of follow-up support and employer discrimination against persons with disabilities as primary constraints. These findings align with *OECD (2018)* on systemic exclusion barriers for graduates with disabilities, and with *Chitsulo's (2019)* observation that Malawian society's charity-oriented perception of disability undermines trained individuals' empowerment.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that vocational training programmes at Malingunde Schools of the Blind play a vital role in empowering children with visual impairments. Through skills-based learning, learners acquire practical competencies that enhance independence and self-reliance. Participation in programmes positively influences confidence, social interaction, and community participation. However, vocational training alone is insufficient to guarantee sustainable employment or entrepreneurship. Structural challenges — including limited resources, inadequate post-training support, and persistent societal stigma — reduce long-term impact, consistent with the *Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990) and Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993).*

The study emphasises the importance of integrated institutional and community support. Recommendations include: strengthened resource mobilisation to improve vocational training facilities, tools, and adaptive

materials; prioritised government and stakeholder funding for specialised equipment; continuous professional development for instructors in vocational pedagogy for learners with visual impairments; establishment of structured post-training support systems including mentorship, start-up capital access, and market linkages; community sensitisation initiatives to reduce stigma; and policy reform to mandate disability-inclusive employment practices.

Future research directions include longitudinal studies tracking graduates' economic trajectories, studies examining employer perceptions toward persons with visual impairments, evaluations of post-training support interventions, comparative analyses across Malawi's special needs institutions, gender-based analyses of vocational outcomes, and assessments of the transferability of the Malingunde model to other disability contexts. Such research would contribute to improved policy formulation and more effective inclusive vocational education practices in Malawi and sub-Saharan Africa more broadly.

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