

**Title**

**ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL ENGAGEMENT: THE IMPACT OF SISTER CIRCLES ON  
GIRL PARTICIPATION AT MKWICHI SECONDARY SCHOOL**

**Author**

**VICTOR KAIMVI**

**Co-Author**

**FREEZA JEFUTARA**



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## ABSTRACT

Girls' participation in academic activities remains a persistent challenge in many secondary schools across Sub-Saharan Africa, including Malawi, where socio-cultural norms, gender expectations, and limited psychosocial support systems often constrain girls' engagement in classroom learning. Although numerous school-based interventions have been introduced to address gender disparities in education, few have been rigorously evaluated to determine their effectiveness in promoting active academic participation. This study examines the impact of the Sister Circles initiative implemented within the Girls' Club at Mkwichi Secondary School in Lilongwe District, Malawi, with the aim of assessing its effectiveness in enhancing girls' academic engagement.

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative data were collected from 45 female students using structured questionnaires and systematic classroom observations to measure levels of participation, collaboration, confidence, and engagement in academic activities. This was followed by a qualitative phase involving semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected participants to explore their lived experiences and perceptions of the Sister Circles program in greater depth. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data.

The findings reveal that Sister Circles had a highly positive influence on girls' academic participation. Participants reported increased confidence in speaking during lessons, greater willingness to collaborate with peers, and improved engagement in group discussions and academic tasks. Quantitative results showed high mean scores for collaboration on academic work (4.40 out of 5) and participation in class discussions (4.35 out of 5). Qualitative findings further highlighted the role of Sister Circles in reducing fear of judgment, fostering peer support, and creating a safe learning environment that encouraged girls to express themselves freely.

The study concludes that Sister Circles are an effective, low-cost, and sustainable strategy for promoting girls' academic participation and gender equity in secondary education. It recommends the institutionalization and expansion of the program to other schools in Malawi, alongside continuous capacity building for facilitators to ensure long-term impact.

## Keywords

Sister Circles; Girl Participation; Academic Engagement; Girls' Club; Empowerment; Secondary Education; Malawi

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Chapter

This chapter provides a comprehensive foundation for the study by situating it within broader educational, social, and gender equity discourses. It elaborates on the context of girls' education in Malawi, the importance of academic participation, and the rationale

for implementing peer-support interventions such as Sister Circles. The chapter further clarifies the problem under investigation, the purpose and objectives of the study, and its significance to education stakeholders. By offering a detailed background and justification, this chapter establishes the basis upon which the subsequent chapters are built.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Education is widely recognized as a cornerstone for social, economic, and political development across the globe. For developing countries such as Malawi, education plays an especially critical role in breaking cycles of poverty, promoting gender equality, and empowering marginalized populations. Girls' education, in particular, has been shown to yield far-reaching benefits, including improved family health, reduced early marriage, increased economic productivity, and enhanced civic participation. Despite these well-documented benefits, girls continue to face persistent challenges that limit not only their access to education but also their meaningful participation within learning environments.

In Malawi, government policies and international commitments have led to increased enrolment of girls at both primary and secondary levels. However, increased enrolment has not always translated into equitable learning experiences. Many girls remain passive participants in classrooms, rarely voicing their opinions, asking questions, or engaging in collaborative academic activities. This lack of participation is often rooted in socio-cultural norms that emphasize obedience, silence, and submissiveness in girls, while encouraging

assertiveness and leadership among boys. Such norms are frequently reinforced within school environments, both consciously and unconsciously, through teaching practices, peer interactions, and institutional cultures.

Secondary school represents a particularly sensitive stage in girls' educational journeys. Adolescence is characterized by rapid physical, emotional, and social changes, which can heighten girls' vulnerability to low self-esteem, fear of judgment, and social exclusion. At this stage, academic participation becomes increasingly important, as learners are expected to engage in higher-order thinking, group discussions, and independent problem-solving. For girls who lack confidence or supportive peer networks, these expectations can become significant barriers to learning.

In response to these challenges, schools and education stakeholders have increasingly turned to girl-centered and peer-based interventions aimed at fostering confidence, leadership, and academic engagement. One such intervention is the Sister Circles initiative implemented within the Girls' Club at Mkwichi Secondary School. Sister Circles are structured, small-group forums where girls meet regularly to share experiences, discuss academic and personal challenges, and provide mutual encouragement. The initiative is grounded in the belief that peer support and safe spaces can empower girls to overcome barriers to participation and develop a stronger sense of agency within academic settings.

While Sister Circles have gained popularity as a practical and low-cost intervention, their

effectiveness has often been assumed rather than empirically demonstrated. At Mkwichi Secondary School, anecdotal evidence suggested improvements in girls' confidence and classroom engagement following the introduction of Sister Circles. However, without systematic research, it remained unclear whether these perceived changes were consistent, significant, and directly attributable to the program. This study therefore sought to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based examination of the impact of Sister Circles on girls' academic participation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the presence of Girls' Clubs and other gender-focused initiatives in Malawian secondary schools, girls' academic participation remains uneven and, in many cases, low. At Mkwichi Secondary School, teachers observed that a significant number of female students rarely contributed to class discussions, hesitated to ask questions, and showed limited engagement in group academic activities. These patterns persisted even among academically capable students, suggesting that non-academic factors such as confidence and peer dynamics were influencing participation.

The introduction of Sister Circles was intended to address these barriers by creating supportive peer networks. However, prior to this study, there was no empirical evidence to determine whether the program effectively improved girls' academic participation. Without such evidence, it is difficult for school administrators and policymakers to make informed decisions regarding the continuation, scaling, or modification of the

initiative. This study therefore sought to fill this gap by systematically examining the impact of Sister Circles on girls' academic engagement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the Sister Circles initiative within the Girls' Club at Mkwichi Secondary School in enhancing girls' participation in academic activities. The study aimed to determine whether participation in Sister Circles influenced girls' confidence, classroom engagement, collaboration with peers, and overall enthusiasm for learning.

### **Research Objectives**

The specific objectives of the study were:

To assess the level of girls' academic participation following involvement in Sister Circles.

To examine the influence of Sister Circles on girls' confidence and willingness to speak in class.

To explore girls' perceptions and lived experiences of participating in Sister Circles.

To identify the broader educational and psychosocial benefits associated with the program.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

How has participation in Sister Circles influenced girls' academic engagement at Mkwichi Secondary School?

In what ways have Sister Circles affected girls' confidence and classroom participation?

How do girls perceive the role of Sister Circles in supporting their academic and personal development?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant to multiple stakeholders. For educators and school administrators, the findings provide evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of peer-support interventions in promoting girls' participation. For policymakers and education planners, the study offers guidance on scalable strategies for advancing gender equity in education. For researchers, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on girl-centered educational interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The study was conducted at Mkwichi Secondary School and focused exclusively on female students who were members of the Girls' Club and participated in Sister Circles. The study examined academic participation rather than academic performance measured through examination scores. As with any case study, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all schools; however, they provide valuable insights into similar educational contexts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptualizing Academic Participation**

Academic participation refers to the active involvement of learners in instructional activities that promote learning and knowledge construction. This includes

behaviors such as asking and answering questions, participating in discussions, contributing ideas during group work, completing assigned tasks, and engaging critically with learning materials. Active participation is widely recognized as a key predictor of academic achievement, cognitive development, and long-term educational success.

In secondary school contexts, participation becomes increasingly important as learning shifts from teacher-centered instruction to more interactive and learner-centered approaches. However, participation is not equally distributed among learners. Gender, cultural expectations, teacher attitudes, peer dynamics, and classroom climate all influence the extent to which students feel comfortable and motivated to participate. For girls in particular, participation is often constrained by social norms that discourage assertiveness and public expression.

### **Gender Disparities in Classroom Participation**

Gender disparities in classroom participation have been widely documented across educational systems in both developed and developing countries. Research indicates that boys are more likely to dominate classroom discussions, receive more teacher attention, and engage in assertive learning behaviors, while girls tend to adopt passive roles. These patterns are often reinforced by cultural expectations that associate leadership and confidence with masculinity, while valuing silence and obedience in girls.

In many African contexts, including Malawi, girls face additional barriers such as early

marriage, household responsibilities, and limited role models. These challenges not only affect school attendance but also undermine girls' confidence and willingness to participate actively in class. Over time, reduced participation can negatively affect academic performance, self-esteem, and aspirations.

### **Peer Influence and Social Support in Learning**

Peers play a critical role in shaping students' academic attitudes and behaviors. Positive peer relationships contribute to emotional security, motivation, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for effective learning. Conversely, negative peer interactions, such as ridicule or exclusion, can discourage participation and reinforce fear of failure.

Peer-support structures such as study groups, mentoring programs, and clubs provide opportunities for collaborative learning and mutual encouragement. These structures are particularly beneficial for marginalized groups, including girls, as they reduce isolation and create shared accountability for academic success. Sister Circles function as peer-support groups that intentionally foster trust, cooperation, and shared learning goals.

### **Social Learning Theory and Academic Behavior**

Social Learning Theory emphasizes that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to adopt behaviors that they observe being modeled successfully by others, particularly peers with whom they identify. In

educational settings, students learn not only academic content but also social behaviors such as participation, communication, and problem-solving.

Within Sister Circles, girls observe peers who confidently ask questions, express opinions, and engage in academic tasks. These observations help normalize active participation and reduce anxiety associated with speaking in class. Over time, repeated exposure to positive role models reinforces self-efficacy and promotes sustained behavioral change.

### **Empowerment Theory and Safe Learning Spaces**

Empowerment theory focuses on increasing individuals' capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. In education, empowerment involves creating conditions that enable learners to develop confidence, voice, and agency. For girls, empowerment is closely linked to access to safe spaces where they can express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Safe spaces are structured environments that prioritize respect, confidentiality, and inclusivity. They allow girls to discuss sensitive issues, challenge gender norms, and build leadership skills. Sister Circles embody the principles of empowerment by providing a supportive environment where girls can share experiences, support one another, and develop a positive academic identity. **Holistic Impact of Girl-Centered Programs**

Girl-centered programs often extend beyond academic outcomes to address psychosocial, emotional, and life-skills development. Such

programs have been shown to improve self-esteem, resilience, communication skills, and decision-making abilities. These outcomes indirectly support academic engagement by enhancing focus, motivation, and persistence.

In contexts where girls face multiple vulnerabilities, holistic interventions are particularly important. By addressing both academic and non-academic challenges, programs like Sister Circles contribute to overall well-being and sustained school participation.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature**

Although existing research highlights the importance of peer support, empowerment, and safe spaces, there is limited empirical evidence on structured peer-group interventions within Malawian secondary schools. Few studies have examined how such programs specifically influence classroom participation and engagement. This study addresses this gap by providing context-specific evidence on the impact of Sister Circles.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design. This design involves collecting and analyzing quantitative data in the first phase, followed by qualitative data in the second phase to explain and enrich the quantitative findings. The mixed-methods approach was appropriate because it allowed for a comprehensive examination of both measurable outcomes and subjective

experiences related to participation in Sister Circles.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

The study was guided by a pragmatic research paradigm, which emphasizes the use of methods that best address the research problem. Pragmatism supports the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches and recognizes that knowledge is constructed through both objective measurement and subjective interpretation.

### **Study Area**

Mkwichi Secondary School is located in Lilongwe District, Malawi. The school serves students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and has implemented various initiatives aimed at promoting gender equity and student well-being. The Girls' Club, under which Sister Circles operate, is an established platform for empowering female students.

### **Target Population**

The target population comprised all female students enrolled at Mkwichi Secondary School who were members of the Girls' Club. These students regularly participated in Sister Circle activities facilitated by trained teachers and peer mentors.

### **Sample Size and Sampling Techniques**

A total of 50 female students participated in the study. Stratified random sampling was used to select 45 students for the quantitative phase, ensuring representation across different class levels. Purposive sampling was used to select five students for in-depth interviews based on their active involvement in Sister Circles.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

Three main instruments were used to collect data: structured questionnaires, classroom observation checklists, and semi-structured interview guides. The questionnaire measured levels of participation, confidence, and collaboration using Likert-scale items. Observation checklists captured actual participation behaviors during lessons, while interviews explored participants' perceptions and experiences.

## **Validity and Reliability**

To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by education experts and piloted with a small group of students. Reliability of the questionnaire was enhanced through clear wording and consistent administration procedures. Triangulation of data sources further strengthened the credibility of the findings.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, questionnaires were administered and classroom observations conducted. In the second phase, interviews were carried out with selected participants to gain deeper insights into the quantitative results.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentages. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, following a systematic process of coding, categorization, and theme development.

Ethical approval was obtained from school authorities. Participation was voluntary,

informed consent was secured, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes.

## **RESULTS**

### **Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

The participants represented a range of age groups and class levels, reflecting the diversity of the female student population at Mkwichi Secondary School. This diversity provided a comprehensive understanding of how Sister Circles influenced girls at different stages of secondary education.

### **Quantitative Results on Academic Participation**

Analysis of questionnaire data revealed high levels of academic participation among girls involved in Sister Circles. Mean scores across participation indicators were consistently above 4.0 on a five-point scale, indicating strong agreement with statements related to confidence, collaboration, and engagement.

### **Classroom Participation and Engagement**

Classroom observations showed that girls participating in Sister Circles were more likely to raise their hands, ask questions, and contribute ideas during lessons. Teachers also noted improved attentiveness and willingness to engage in group activities.

### **Collaboration and Group Work**

Collaboration on academic tasks recorded the highest mean score (4.40), suggesting that Sister Circles effectively promoted

cooperative learning. Girls reported feeling more comfortable working with peers and sharing responsibilities during group assignments.

### **Confidence and Communication Skills**

Participants reported increased confidence in expressing their ideas and opinions. Many indicated that Sister Circles helped them overcome fear of making mistakes and speaking in front of others.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Overall, the results demonstrate a strong positive relationship between participation in Sister Circles and girls' academic engagement, confidence, and collaboration.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings of this study indicate that Sister Circles significantly enhanced girls' academic participation at Mkwichi Secondary School. Increased confidence, improved collaboration, and greater engagement in classroom discussions suggest that the program effectively addressed key barriers to participation.

### **Relationship to Existing Literature**

The results align with existing research on peer support, social learning, and empowerment. Similar studies have found that supportive peer environments encourage active participation and reduce anxiety associated with public expression. Sister Circles functioned as learning communities that reinforced positive academic behaviors.

### **Psychosocial Benefits of Sister Circles**

Beyond academic outcomes, the program contributed to improved emotional well-being and resilience. Participants reported feeling supported and motivated, which enhanced their overall school experience.

### **Implications for Gender Equity in Education**

The findings highlight the potential of girl-centered, peer-based interventions to promote gender equity in secondary education. By creating safe spaces for girls, schools can foster inclusive learning environments that support active participation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited to one school and a relatively small sample size. Additionally, the focus on self-reported data may introduce bias. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into the impact of Sister Circles.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the impact of the Sister Circles initiative on girls' academic participation at Mkwichi Secondary School. The findings demonstrate that Sister Circles are an effective strategy for enhancing confidence, collaboration, and classroom engagement among female students. By fostering peer support and creating safe learning spaces, the program addresses both academic and psychosocial barriers to participation.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The study suggests that schools and education authorities should consider integrating peer-support programs like Sister

Circles into formal education structures. Such programs offer a cost-effective and

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Sister Circles should be expanded to other secondary schools across Malawi.

School administrations should institutionalize the program to ensure sustainability.

Continuous training should be provided for facilitators and peer mentors.

Future research should examine the long-term impact of Sister Circles on academic performance and retention.

## Suggestions for Further Research

Further studies should explore the effectiveness of Sister Circles in different educational contexts and examine their impact on other outcomes such as leadership development and career aspirations.

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