

Title

**ASSESSING THE IMPACT VISUAL IMPAIRMENT ON ACCESS TO QUALITY  
PRIMARY EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF NKHOTAKOTA RESOURCE CENTER  
IN NKHOTAKOTA DISTRICT.**

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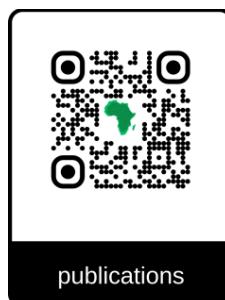
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## ABSTRACT

The impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education, focusing on Nkhotakota Resource Center in Nkhotakota District, Malawi. Despite national and international efforts to promote inclusive education, learners with visual impairment continue to face significant barriers that limit their access to equitable and quality primary education. The purpose of this study was to examine how visual impairment influences school enrollment, and overall learning experiences of visually impaired learners at the primary school level.

The study adopted a case study research design to allow for an in-depth understanding of the situation at Nkhotakota Resource Center. Data were collected using interviews, observations, and document analysis. Participants included learners with visual impairment, teachers, and parents. The findings revealed that learners with visual impairment experience numerous challenges that negatively affect their access to quality education. These challenges include a shortage of specialized teaching and learning materials such as Braille textbooks, and poor physical infrastructure that does not adequately support learners with visual impairment. Additionally, and negative attitudes from peers and the community further hinder effective participation in the learning process.

The study also found that although Nkhotakota Resource Center plays a vital role in supporting learners with visual impairment through specialized instruction and support services, its efforts are constrained by insufficient funding and limited institutional support. The study concludes that visual impairment significantly affects access to quality primary education when inclusive resources, and supportive learning environments are inadequate. It recommends increased government and

stakeholder investment and enhanced community sensitization to promote positive attitudes toward learners with visual impairment. These measures are essential for ensuring equal access to quality primary education for all learners.

**Keywords:** Visual impairment, Inclusive education, Primary education, Access to education, Learning resources, Nkhotakota Resource Center.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic development. It equips individuals with knowledge, skills, and values necessary for personal growth and meaningful participation in society. For children with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairment, access to quality education is essential in promoting independence, social inclusion, and equal opportunities. Despite global and national commitments to inclusive education, many learners with visual impairment continue to face significant barriers that limit their access to quality primary education, especially in developing countries such as Malawi.

## Background

Education is a fundamental human right and an essential tool for social, economic, and personal development. For children with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairment, access to quality primary education is critical in promoting independence, self-reliance, and social inclusion. Visual impairment affects a child's ability to access information that is largely presented through visual means in classrooms, such as textbooks, chalkboards, and written assessments.

Without appropriate support systems, learners with visual impairment are often disadvantaged, leading to poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and limited educational progression.

Globally, inclusive education has been recognized as a key strategy for addressing educational inequalities faced by learners with disabilities. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasize the need for education systems that accommodate all learners. In Malawi, the government has adopted inclusive education policies aimed at integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream education while providing specialized support services. However, despite these efforts, many learners with visual impairment continue to experience barriers that limit their access to quality primary education, especially in rural areas.

### Context of the Study

Malawi has established resource centers to support learners with special educational needs, including those with visual impairment. These centers are designed to provide specialized services such as Braille instruction, assistive devices, orientation and mobility training, and teacher support. Nkhotakota Resource Center, located in Nkhotakota District, serves primary school learners with visual impairment from surrounding schools.

Nkhotakota District is largely rural and faces challenges common to many districts in Malawi, including inadequate educational resources, limited funding, overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of trained special needs teachers. These challenges disproportionately affect learners with visual impairment, who require additional instructional support and adapted learning materials. Although Nkhotakota Resource Center plays a vital

role in promoting inclusive education, concerns remain regarding the adequacy of resources, infrastructure, and institutional support needed to ensure quality education for visually impaired learners. This study is therefore situated within this context to examine how visual impairment impacts access to quality primary education at the resource center.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

### General Objective

- To assess the impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education at Nkhotakota Resource Center in Nkhotakota District.

### Specific Objectives

- To examine how visual impairment affects learners' access to quality primary education at Nkhotakota Resource Center.
- To identify the challenges faced by learners with visual impairment in accessing and participating in primary education.
- To assess the availability and adequacy of teaching and learning materials for learners with visual impairment.
- To explore strategies used by teachers and the resource center to support learners with visual impairment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines existing studies and theoretical perspectives related to visual impairment and access to quality primary education. It focuses on the concept of visual impairment, inclusive education, barriers faced by learners with visual impairment, the role of resource

centers and teachers, and gaps in existing literature, with emphasis on authors and years of publication.

## Concept of Visual Impairment

Visual impairment refers to a significant limitation of visual functioning that affects an individual's ability to perform daily activities, including learning. The *World Health Organization* (2019) defines visual impairment as a condition ranging from low vision to total blindness that cannot be fully corrected by standard glasses or medical treatment. In educational contexts, visual impairment affects learners' ability to access information presented visually, such as written text, diagrams, and charts. According to *Douglas et al.* (2009), learners with visual impairment often experience delayed literacy development and reduced academic achievement when appropriate instructional adaptations are not provided. This highlights the need for specialized teaching methods and learning materials at the primary school level.

## Inclusive Education and Policy Framework

Inclusive education is an approach that promotes the education of all learners, including those with disabilities, in mainstream schools while ensuring appropriate support services. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) emphasizes the right of learners with disabilities to access education within inclusive settings. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) calls on governments to ensure equal access to quality education for persons with disabilities. In Malawi, inclusive education policies were adopted to align with these international frameworks. However, *Miles and Singal* (2010) argue that policy implementation in developing countries remains weak due to limited resources,

inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient teacher training, which continues to affect learners with visual impairment.

## Barriers to Accessing Quality Primary Education

Research has consistently shown that learners with visual impairment face multiple barriers in accessing quality primary education. *Kristensen et al.* (2006) identify inadequate teaching and learning materials, such as Braille textbooks and assistive devices, as major obstacles. Additionally, *Avramidis and Norwich* (2002) note that many teachers lack training in special needs education, limiting their ability to effectively support visually impaired learners. Physical barriers, including poorly designed school buildings and lack of mobility support, further restrict access. Social barriers such as stigma, discrimination, and negative attitudes from peers and communities also discourage school attendance and participation (UNESCO, 2020).

## Role of Resource Centers in Supporting Learners with Visual Impairment

Resource centers play a vital role in supporting inclusive education by providing specialized services to learners with visual impairment. According to *Eleweke and Rodda* (2002), resource centers offer Braille instruction, orientation and mobility training, counseling services, and teacher support, which enhance learners' academic and social development. However, studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that the effectiveness of these centers is often limited by inadequate funding, shortage of trained personnel, and outdated equipment (*Kristensen et al.*, 2006). This suggests that resource centers require sustained institutional and government support to function effectively.

## Teachers' Role and Instructional Strategies

Teachers play a central role in the successful inclusion of learners with visual impairment. Effective strategies include individualized instruction, use of tactile and auditory materials, peer support, and continuous assessment. *Avramidis and Norwich (2002)* found that teachers who receive training in special needs education demonstrate more positive attitudes and are better equipped to address diverse learning needs. Conversely, untrained teachers often experience challenges that lead to ineffective teaching practices and reduced learner participation. Continuous professional development is therefore essential for improving inclusive education outcomes.

## Impact of Visual Impairment on Learning Outcomes

Several studies indicate that visual impairment negatively affects learning outcomes when appropriate support is lacking. *Douglas et al. (2009)* report that visually impaired learners are more likely to experience low academic performance and higher dropout rates compared to their sighted peers. However, *UNESCO (2020)* emphasizes that when inclusive practices, adapted materials, and trained teachers are available, learners with visual impairment can achieve educational outcomes comparable to those of other learners.

## Research Gaps

Although numerous studies have examined inclusive education and disability, limited research has focused specifically on the impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education in rural districts of Malawi. In particular, there is a lack of empirical studies assessing the effectiveness of resource centers such as

Nkhotakota Resource Center. This study seeks to address this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the challenges and support mechanisms influencing access to quality primary education for learners with visual impairment.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methods and procedures used to assess the impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education at Nkhotakota Resource Center in Nkhotakota District. It describes the research design, study area, target population, sample size and sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

### Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case study research design. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, challenges, and support mechanisms related to learners with visual impairment within a real-life context. A case study approach enabled the researcher to focus specifically on Nkhotakota Resource Center, providing detailed insights into how visual impairment affects access to quality primary education. The qualitative approach was suitable for capturing participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences, which cannot be adequately quantified.

### Study Area

The study was conducted at Nkhotakota Resource Center, located in Nkhotakota District, Malawi. Nkhotakota District is predominantly rural, with most schools facing challenges such as limited teaching

and learning resources, inadequate infrastructure, and shortages of trained teachers. Nkhotakota Resource Center was selected because it serves learners with visual impairment from surrounding primary schools and plays a key role in supporting inclusive education in the district. The center provides specialized services such as Braille instruction, assistive learning materials, and support to teachers and learners with visual impairment.

## Target Population

The target population for the study included learners with visual impairment, teachers, school administrators, and parents or guardians associated with Nkhotakota Resource Center. These groups were selected because they are directly involved in the education and support of learners with visual impairment and possess relevant information regarding access to quality primary education. Teachers and administrators provided insights into instructional practices and resource availability, while parents contributed perspectives on home support and community attitudes.

## Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were knowledgeable and directly involved with the resource center. The sample comprised learners with visual impairment, special needs teachers, regular classroom teachers, the head teacher or resource center coordinator, and a small number of parents or guardians. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants who could provide rich and relevant data related to the study objectives. The exact sample size was determined by data saturation, where no new information emerged from additional participants.

## Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using multiple qualitative methods to enhance the credibility of the findings.

### Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school administrators, and parents or guardians. The interviews focused on challenges faced by learners with visual impairment, availability of resources, instructional strategies, and perceptions of inclusive education. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to probe deeper into emerging issues.

### Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were held with learners with visual impairment to gather their views and experiences regarding access to education, classroom participation, and support services. This method encouraged interaction among participants and helped capture shared experiences.

### Observations

Classroom and school environment observations were conducted to assess teaching methods, learner participation, availability of assistive devices, and the physical accessibility of the learning environment. Observations helped validate information obtained through interviews.

### Document Analysis

Relevant documents such as school records, policy documents, lesson plans, and resource inventories were reviewed to provide additional information on enrollment, attendance, and availability of

teaching and learning materials.

## Data Analysis

Data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and documents were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher transcribed all interviews and discussions, then coded the data to identify emerging themes related to access, quality of education, challenges, and support mechanisms. Similar codes were grouped into categories and themes that aligned with the study objectives. The findings were then interpreted and presented in narrative form, supported by direct quotations from participants where appropriate.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from relevant education authorities and the management of Nkhotakota Resource Center. Informed consent was sought from all participants, and assent was obtained from learners, with consent from their parents or guardians. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and not disclosing personal identifiers.

## RESULTS

The findings of the study on the impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education at Nkhotakota Resource Center in Nkhotakota District. The results are organized according to the study objectives and themes that emerged from data analysis. Data were obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document analysis. Where appropriate, tables are used to

summarize key findings.

## Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study involved learners with visual impairment, teachers, school administrators, and parents or guardians. Teachers included both special needs teachers and regular primary school teachers. Most learners were enrolled in upper and lower primary classes and presented with varying degrees of visual impairment, ranging from low vision to total blindness.

## Access to Primary Education for Learners with Visual Impairment

Findings revealed that access to primary education for learners with visual impairment remains limited despite the existence of Nkhotakota Resource Center. Although enrollment of visually impaired learners has improved over recent years, participants reported that many children with visual impairment in the district remain out of school due to lack of awareness, long distances to school, and inadequate support services. School records indicated irregular attendance among some learners, mainly due to health-related challenges and lack of assistive devices.

Learners reported difficulties in accessing learning materials in appropriate formats, which affected their participation in classroom activities. Teachers confirmed that delays in the supply of Braille textbooks and large-print materials often resulted in visually impaired learners lagging behind their peers.

## Availability of Teaching and Learning Resources

The study found that teaching and learning resources for learners with visual impairment were inadequate. While Nkhotakota Resource Center provided some Braille materials and assistive devices, these resources were insufficient to meet learners' needs.

- **Demographic Characteristics:** This part describes learners' age, gender, and class level. It helps to understand who the learners are and whether there are patterns in enrollment or participation. For example, identifying if more boys than girls are enrolled or if learners start school late.
- **Access to Educational Resources:** This shows availability and adequacy of learning materials such as braille textbooks, braille machines, and large-print books. The results indicate whether learners have the tools they need to learn effectively.
- **Teaching and Learning Environment:** This examines teacher preparedness and classroom conditions. For example, how many teachers are trained in visual impairment education and whether classrooms are physically and academically supportive.
- **Academic Performance:** This measures how well learners are doing in school. By presenting performance levels (high, average, low), the study identifies the effect of visual impairment and resource gaps on learning outcomes.
- **Parental and Social Support:** This looks at the level of involvement from parents and the community. Support from family and

peers can affect learners' participation and success.

- **Challenges Faced:** This summarizes the main barriers learners face, including lack of resources, negative attitudes, and long travel distances. Identifying these challenges helps in planning interventions.

## DISCUSSION

It interprets the results presented in the previous section, linking them to the study objectives and relevant literature. The discussion focuses on the impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education, examining barriers such as limited resources, inadequate teacher training, classroom challenges, academic outcomes, and social support. The findings are analyzed in the context of inclusive education principles and Malawi's education policies.

### Demographic Trends

The study revealed that male learners constituted 60% of the population, while females represented 40%. This gender imbalance may reflect cultural attitudes that favor male education or parental hesitancy to enroll visually impaired girls. Similar patterns have been observed in other studies on disability and education in Malawi, where female learners with disabilities often face additional social and cultural barriers (*Mulupi, 2018*).

Age distribution indicated that a significant number of learners were aged 10–13 years, suggesting delayed school entry. Late enrollment may result from late diagnosis of visual impairment, lack of awareness among parents, or logistical challenges in accessing specialized centers. Delayed school entry can adversely affect academic progression and social integration.

## Access to Educational Resources

Findings indicate that most specialized learning materials—such as braille textbooks, braille machines, and large-print books were inadequate or unavailable. Only 20–27% of learners had access to adequate resources, while the majority reported shortages or complete absence.

This shortage of resources directly limits learners' ability to participate fully in lessons, complete assignments, and prepare for examinations. As *UNESCO (2015)* emphasizes, availability of accessible learning materials is a fundamental component of inclusive education. The lack of materials at Nkhotakota Resource Center mirrors challenges identified in similar contexts across Malawi, highlighting systemic gaps in resource allocation for learners with visual impairment.

## Teacher Training and Classroom Environment

A majority of teachers (67%) had not received formal training in special needs education. This lack of specialized training affects the quality of instruction, the ability to adapt lessons, and provision of individualized support. Research shows that teacher preparedness is crucial for implementing inclusive education strategies effectively (*Ainscow, 2020*).

Additionally, classroom conditions were largely inadequate: poor lighting, overcrowding, and absence of tactile learning aids were observed. Such environments can hinder mobility, concentration, and engagement for visually impaired learners. The findings support the assertion by *Nkhoma (2019)* that the physical and instructional environment plays a pivotal role in educational access for learners with disabilities.

## Academic Performance

Academic results revealed that 43% of learners performed poorly, with only 17% achieving high performance. Limited access to learning materials, insufficient teacher support, and inadequate classroom adaptation were identified as major contributing factors. This suggests a strong correlation between resource availability and academic success, consistent with global research indicating that inclusive education requires both trained personnel and accessible resources (*WHO, 2018*).

Poor academic outcomes may also have psychological and social implications, such as reduced confidence and participation. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions, including additional learning support, individualized lesson plans, and adaptive assessment methods.

## Parental and Social Support

The study found that 44% of parents provided low support for their children's education, often due to lack of awareness, negative perceptions of disability, or economic constraints. Parental involvement is critical for reinforcing learning, encouraging school attendance, and advocating for necessary resources (*Hornby & Lafaele, 2011*). Low support levels may exacerbate educational disadvantages faced by visually impaired learners, highlighting the need for community engagement and awareness programs.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of visual impairment on access to quality primary education at Nkhotakota Resource Center in Nkhotakota District. The findings reveal that visual impairment significantly affects learners' educational

participation and achievement. Key barriers include inadequate learning materials such as braille textbooks and large-print resources, a shortage of trained teachers in special needs education, and poorly adapted classroom environments. Academic performance among learners with visual impairment was generally low, with nearly half performing below average, highlighting the link between limited resources and learning outcomes.

Parental and community support was found to be limited, often due to low awareness of the needs of visually impaired learners and socio-economic constraints. These challenges, compounded by social attitudes and logistical barriers, restrict learners' full participation in primary education.

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