



Left-Behind and at Risk: Parental Out-Migration to South Africa and Its Impact on School Retention among Primary School Children in Mzimba, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Across sub-Saharan Africa, parental labour migration is widely celebrated as a pathway to household economic advancement. Yet behind the optimism of remittances and opportunity lies a quieter crisis. Anchored by two interconnected objectives, the study set out to examine the impact of parental out-migration on school retention rates among left-behind children (LBC) and analyse how parental absence influences academic challenges leading to school dropout. The study was grounded in a constructivist epistemological paradigm, qualitative research approach and the phenomenological case study design. Purposive, convenient and systematic sampling techniques were used to come up with schools and research participants. Data were gathered through document analysis, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Semi-Structured Interviews. Analysis was conducted through descriptive graphical presentation and rigorous thematic data analysis. The findings expose a deeply troubling paradox: while parental migration to South Africa may generate economic benefits through remittances, it simultaneously triggers a cascade of social and educational consequences that erode children's capacity and motivation to remain in school. The major issues identified include low motivation levels, chronic absenteeism, increased involvement in household chores, disruptive behaviours, and lack of parental care and guidance. It is worth mentioning that Human Capital Development, one of the enablers of Malawi 2063 agenda, envisions a Malawi where every citizen, regardless of background or circumstances, is equipped with the knowledge and skills to contribute meaningfully to national development. LBC's premature departure from the education system constitutes a haemorrhage of human potential, a loss that will reverberate across generations, undermining the very workforce Malawi 2063 Agenda depends upon. Therefore, the study recommends enhanced parental involvement from a distance, community and guardian engagement as well as policy and governance intervention.

Keywords: Parental Out-Migration, Parental Involvement, Left-Behind Children, Education

INTRODUCTION

Education is considered a fundamental human right and a key factor in developing human capital (Lumadi, 2019). Since education is a means of empowering individuals to enhance their environment and contribute to national development, many nations have recognised it as a crucial tool for supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCO, 2017). In Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, education is regarded as a means of expanding human capabilities and choices, with primary education providing a foundation for further educational advancement. It develops personal and social skills and strengthens the competence required for later erudition (Achola & Pillai, 2002).

Despite the recognition of education as a fundamental right, specific challenges such as lack of parental involvement continue to undermine its effectiveness in some areas (El Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010). Children in many developing countries in Africa still fall short of basic literacy and fail to transition to



secondary schools. According to Erlendsdóttir et al. (2022), a major challenge facing the education system is that children come to school poorly prepared and attendance is irregular, resulting in poor school experiences, low educational attainment, and high dropout rates. It is widely held that parental guardianship has an important impact on children's schooling years.

Conversely, the out-migration of parents has become a common childhood experience in Mzimba District (Niboye, 2018). Parental out-migration to South Africa is an attractive means of improving a rural family's standard of living; however, it can confer both economic benefits and social costs on children. This study, therefore, aimed to examine parental out-migration and its effect on the primary education completion of left-behind children (LBC) in Mzimba District, and to acquire a deeper understanding of how teachers and learners are affected in the teaching and learning process in the absence of one or both biological parents.

Context of the Study

Student retention rate is an important indicator of the quality of education and support that students receive. Student retention rate refers to the percentage of students who enroll in a school and successfully complete their studies through to graduation (Education Management and Information System [EMIS] Report, 2023). A high retention rate indicates that a large proportion of enrolled students ultimately graduate, while a low retention rate suggests that only a small fraction complete their programmes (Ibid).

Access to education by children has been a major concern worldwide. Policy frameworks in many governments do not adequately address issues concerning enrolment and retention (UNESCO, 2000). Ensuring that children enroll in school is one thing, but whether they complete their education is another. Most researchers attribute dropout to structural factors at the household, school, and societal levels (Colclough et al., 2003; Hunt, 2008). In an attempt to achieve Education For All (EFA), as provided for in the Dakar Framework of April 2000, the Malawi government introduced policies such as Free Primary Education. Nevertheless, enrolment and pupil retention remain subjects of concern.

It was therefore necessary to examine the hidden costs of parental migration on LBC in Mzimba, where labour migration is a common and established practice. The motivation for this research rested on the significant number of children believed to have been academically affected by the prolonged absence of parents as a result of parental out-migration to South Africa.

Statement of the Problem

The high rate of parental migration to South Africa has caused a significant reduction in direct parental supervision and care for children in Mzimba District. While migration is intended to improve livelihoods, it simultaneously creates a socio-academic void that threatens the retention of students in primary and secondary schools. The lack of localised data on the specific mechanisms through which the absence of parental supervision translates into school disengagement and dropout necessitated an investigation into this phenomenon.

Research Objectives

The study was anchored by the following objectives:

1. To examine the impact of parental out-migration on school retention rates among children left behind.
2. To analyse how parental absence influences academic challenges leading to school dropout.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Design



The study adopted a constructivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed through human interaction and as subjective and changeable. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilising qualitative data collection methods and analysis techniques. The study further employed a phenomenological case study design. As Cohen et al. (2007, p. 253) note, a case study "provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories."

Study Site and Target Population

The study was conducted in four purposively selected primary schools in Mzimba District, in the Northern Education Division (NED). These schools were selected on account of documented high rates of parental out-migration to South Africa within their catchment communities and correspondingly high dropout figures recorded in school attendance registers. The target population comprised Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) overseeing the zone, head teachers, teachers, and learners in Standards 5 to 8 who had experienced the migration of one or both parents.

Sample Size, Sampling Procedure and Inclusion Criteria

The study targeted a sample of thirty-six participants, a size considered adequate given that qualitative research typically focuses on small, purposefully selected, information-rich samples rather than statistically representative ones (Swain, 2017). Sampling combined three techniques suited to the different categories of participants. Head teachers and ordinary teachers were selected purposively on the basis of having at least two years of teaching experience in the selected schools. PEAs were included through convenience sampling, reflecting the limited number of officers serving the zone. Learners were drawn through systematic sampling, restricted to those in Standards 5 to 8 whose parent(s) had migrated to South Africa for a continuous period of at least one year.

Out of the targeted thirty-six participants, only thirty-two were involved because at that point, saturation was reached. This approach to determining sample adequacy is consistent with established qualitative practice, in which sample size is judged by the richness and sufficiency of the resulting data rather than by a predetermined numerical target (Swain, 2017).

Table 5.1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

Gender	PEA	H	T	L	Total
Males	1	4	6	9	20
Females	1	0	2	9	12
Total	2	4	8	18	32

Key: PEA – Primary Education Advisors; H – Head teachers; T – Teachers; L – Learners

Data Collection Instruments

Data were generated through three complementary instruments: document analysis of school attendance registers spanning the 2023/2024 academic year, semi-structured interviews with PEAs, head teachers and ordinary teachers, and focus group discussions (FGDs) with learners. The use of multiple instruments and participant categories enabled methodological and data-source triangulation.

Data Analysis Procedure

Qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were transcribed and analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis starting from familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts to producing the thematic account presented in this report. Coding was conducted manually, with



codes and emerging themes compared across the four schools and across participant categories to identify convergence and divergence in perspectives before the themes were finalised.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was pursued using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility, for example, was strengthened through triangulation of data sources and participant categories, and through member checking, in which summarised transcripts and preliminary themes were shared with a subset of participants to confirm that their views had been accurately captured and interpreted. Peer debriefing was conducted with a research colleague who reviewed the coding scheme and emerging themes to guard against researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance and approval were sought from Mzuzu University Research Ethics Committee (MZUNIREC). Permission was sought and obtained from the Director of Education and Sports (DES) in Mzimba and from the head teachers of the selected schools before data collection began.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, its voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants; for learner participants, the head-teacher's consent and the learner's own assent were secured before inclusion in FGDs. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured through the use of participant codes rather than real names throughout data recording, analysis and reporting.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study explored the impact of parental out-migration on school retention of left-behind children in selected primary schools in Mzimba South. The findings reveal that while migration may provide economic benefits through remittances, it is also associated with several social and educational challenges that negatively affect children's ability to remain in school.

The major issues identified include low motivation levels, chronic absenteeism, increased household responsibilities, disruptive behaviours, and lack of parental care and guidance.

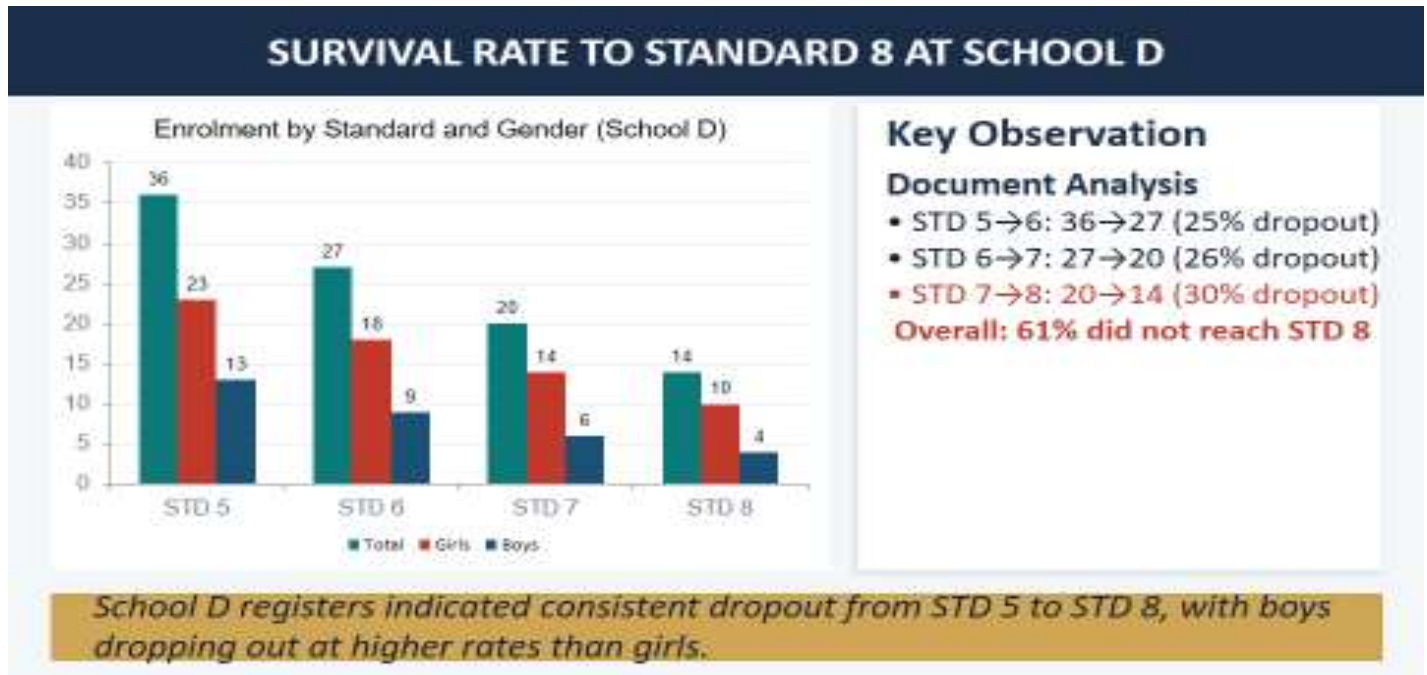
Parental Out-Migration And Retention Rates Among Children Left Behind.

The study sought to establish the survival rate to standard eight, that is, the proportion of learners who complete primary education. 18 of 32 participants indicated that the survival rate has consistently been low. Notably, the survival rate for boys had generally been lower than that for girls.

For instance, at School D, of the 14 learners who registered for the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations (PSLCE) in the 2023/2024 academic year, only six managed to sit for the examinations, and they were all girls. Boys disproportionately dropped out due to perceptions that migration offers a more direct route to economic emancipation than education.

"Parents who are in South Africa, most of the time, invite boys to join them while they are in Standards 6, 7, and 8. Consequently, boys do not take school seriously. Often, parents give money to their children, which make them feel a sense of maturity and they do not see the need to continue with education. All these factors make learners drop out of school prematurely." (PEA 2)

FIG. 6.1: A graph showing decreased enrolment from standard 5-8 at school D



Source: Registers

Factors Leading to Low Pupil Retention

An interplay of factors was found to influence the increased dropout rate among left-behind children in the area.

Low Motivation Levels

Motivation levels play a significant role in determining whether learning is successful. Learners who are motivated have a greater desire to study, set higher learning objectives, and demonstrate greater persistence (Koca, 2016). However, findings indicate that many LBC in Mzimba South lack motivation, largely due to the educational levels of their parents and the visible economic disparities between labour migrants and those educated and working in their native country's local communities.

"It is very true that most of the left behind children, especially boys, do not go as far as Standard Eight. The main reason is lack of motivation from parents. Most parents did not complete the primary cycle but are doing better economically in South Africa. To them, education is about knowing how to read and write, and nothing more than that." (CHISET 2).

According to self-determination theorists, children begin to value activities that are reinforced by important people in their social settings, including teachers and family members (Koca, 2016). In the study area, LBC's willingness to learn was hindered both by parents' lack of encouragement and by the children's own negative attitudes toward education. Some LBC viewed migration as offering a more direct path to economic success than formal schooling, further eroding their academic motivation.

Remittances versus School Completion

The literature presents potentially opposing effects of migration and remittances on education (Bargain & Boutin, 2015; Koska et al., 2013). Some studies find that migration raises parental academic aspirations for their children (Böhme, 2015), while others document detrimental effects on education (Bouoiyour & Miftah, 2016).

In this study, remittances, whether in cash or in kind, were found to decrease the number of children progressing to secondary school, as some LBC were assigned household responsibilities such as overseeing construction



works or caring for livestock purchased with remittances. Children were effectively compensating for the absent parent by entering the labour force or taking on domestic duties.

"The adult responsibilities given to left-behind children, such as taking care of their parents' livestock, disturb learners greatly. Some parents have been in South Africa for more than ten years and do not recognise the need to be close to their children, take over family responsibilities, and ensure their children are educated." (PEA 1).

Results of a focus group discussion in one of the schools supported the assertion by PEA 1; *"Mbunenesko kuti wANJI mwa ise walikulekera panthowa sukulu chifukwa chandalama izo wapapi wakutitumira, nanga tiwe mukalasi, maghanoghano ghakuwa kunyumba"* ("It is true that some of our colleagues dropped out of school due to remittances parents send to us; though physically present in class, our minds are already home") (MUTELFGD 2). Thus, the researcher concluded that remittances assist families in escaping the poverty trap and enable some learners to acquire school provisions; however, the broader effect of remittances on educational outcomes in the area appears more negative than positive, largely due to the psychological immaturity of recipients and the supplanting of educational priorities.

Parental Absence and Academic Challenges Influencing Learners to Drop Out

The findings reveal that the out-migration of parents creates significant challenges for school managers, teachers, and learners alike. These challenges hamper the effective teaching and learning process in primary schools around the study area.

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism emerged as one of the most significant challenges affecting school retention. Many left-behind children were frequently absent from school, disrupting their learning continuity and academic progress. Teachers reported that irregular attendance often led to poor performance and eventual dropout. The findings replicate existing literature linking parental absence to reduced accountability, diminished motivation for consistent attendance, lower student achievement, social disengagement, and feelings of alienation (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried, 2015; Antia, Rodoreda & Winkler, 2022).

"The major challenge is chronic absenteeism coupled with perpetual dropout, especially among boys. When learners reach senior classes, there are more girls than boys, because most boys join their parents in South Africa. For instance, there is one school in this zone where only six girls may sit for the 2024 PSLCE, after the rest of the girls and all boys failed to report in the third term" (PEA 2).

A review of school attendance registers confirmed that absenteeism, especially in senior primary school classes was on the rise in all the four schools underpinning the participants' interview and FGD responses. Of the eighteen learners who were repeatedly absent, thirteen had both parents who had migrated and one had only the father who had migrated to South Africa. According to Schoeneberger (2012), chronic absence is linked to an increased likelihood of dropout.

In an effort to develop locally appropriate solutions, the study revealed that chronic absenteeism in the study area could most effectively not be addressed through punitive measures, but through collaboration among schools, stakeholders, community members, and families as guided by Ecological Systems Theory.

Lack of Parental Care and Guidance

A critical and overarching finding was the inadequacy of parental care and guidance. Left-behind children often lived with surrogate parents or guardians who were either unable or unwilling to provide adequate academic and emotional support. The absence of parents resulted in limited monitoring of schoolwork, reduced follow-ups, and weakened emotional bonds. Twenty-one out of thirty-two participants identified lack of parental care and guidance as a significant concern.



"The greatest challenge is the stubbornness of some left-behind children. They are boastful and disrespectful; they are difficult to handle because they, profoundly, lack parental care and guidance." (KMT 1).

According to psycho-social theorists and researchers, parental support is a strong predictor of a child's ability to manage anxiety, stress, and various social and psychological challenges (Tesfaw, 2022). Research by Garcia and Thornton (2014) further demonstrates that parental involvement improves student performance, reduces absenteeism, and restores parental confidence in their children's education. A child who is psychologically distressed is unable to concentrate in class or produce satisfactory academic results.

Burdened with household chores

Another key finding was that left-behind children were burdened with excessive household chores, often having less time to study. In the absence of parents, children, particularly girls, were frequently required to assume adult responsibilities such as caring for younger siblings, cooking, and farming. These demands consumed time and energy that would otherwise be devoted to schooling, leading to fatigue, late arrival, and in some cases, complete withdrawal from school.

"As a result of family responsibilities given to children left behind by their migrant parents, prolonged absenteeism, which disrupts continued learning, is high. At times, most learners whose parents are in South Africa are absent-minded, preoccupied with the situation at home. Family responsibilities have a significant bearing on their academic performance." (PEA 1).

These findings are consistent with recent studies showing that parental migration often deteriorates the physical and psychological health of left-behind children due to increased household responsibilities. For example, in Sri Lanka, parental migration was linked to children's increased vulnerability to mental, emotional, and hyperactive disorders (Wickramage et al., 2015), while in Romania, left-behind children in rural areas were more likely to suffer from depression (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2014).

Disruptive Behaviour

The study also found evidence of disruptive behaviours among some LBC. Teachers noted increased cases of indiscipline, poor concentration, and involvement in risky activities. These behavioural issues were often attributed to emotional distress, lack of supervision, and the absence of parental authority.

"In fact, most left-behind children underrate the grandparents they stay with. Generally, they lack moral support from caregivers. A child who is not morally guided brings a lot of challenges to school. Some learners are the 'bosses' of their households and are focused on their parents' wealth. Sometimes their parents buy Bluetooth devices for them, which they bring to school premises and play music loudly, disrupting lessons." (KMHT).

Overall, the findings suggest that parental out-migration, while economically beneficial in some cases, has unintended negative consequences on children's educational experiences and retention. The lack of direct parental involvement appears to be a critical factor influencing absenteeism and overall school engagement, underscoring the need for targeted interventions, including school-based support systems, community involvement, and guidance programmes.

Suggested Solutions to the Challenges

During interviews and FGDs, participants were asked to suggest solutions to the problems encountered by teachers and learners as a result of parental out-migration. Several suggestions emerged from the discussions.

Eight out of fourteen educators proposed that M'mbelwa District Council in Mzimba District, in collaboration with other education stakeholders, should develop deliberate policies or by-laws to restrict the tendency of both parents migrating to South Africa.



"I believe that having by-laws that can be implemented and enforced can help solve the problem. Let Traditional Authorities and other stakeholders come up with a lasting resolution such as allowing only one parent to migrate at a time." (CHISET 2)

It was also revealed that, in one of the education zones, a by-law was formulated in 2021; however, it was never formally endorsed by chiefs for implementation. One proposed by-law stipulated that parents whose children were absent from school without valid reasons were expected to pay a fine of five thousand Malawi Kwacha (MK5, 000), equivalent to USD 2.88.

Participants also recommended that educational stakeholders, including the District Education Manager (DEM) and traditional leaders, should organise regular interface meetings with parents, caregivers, and learners to sensitise them on the realities of life in South Africa and the long-term value of education.

Finally, considering that many LBC under the care of housemaids or aged grandparents are not fully committed to their education, some participants proposed that parents should consider enrolling their children in boarding primary schools or that schools should promote self-boarding initiatives. Much as this arrangement would require additional financial resources, it would create a more conducive learning environment for LBC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were proposed to address the challenges affecting school retention among left-behind children in Mzimba District.

1. **Community and Guardian Engagement:** Guardians and community members should be sensitised on the importance of education and their role in supporting left-behind children and ensuring regular school attendance.
2. **Policy and Government Intervention:** The government and relevant stakeholders should develop policies specifically addressing the welfare of left-behind children, including child protection frameworks targeting communities with high migration rates.
3. **School-Based Support Systems:** Schools should strengthen guidance and counselling provision for LBC and expand access to boarding or self-boarding arrangements, especially for learners under the care of aged caregivers.
4. **Multi-Sectoral Coordination:** Given that no single actor can address this challenge alone, the M'mbelwa District Council, the DEM's office, Traditional Authorities, school management, and social welfare officers should convene an annual coordination forum to review attendance and dropout data, assess progress on by-law enforcement, and adjust interventions accordingly.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting these findings. Firstly, the study was confined to primary schools in Mzimba District; while the phenomenological case study design supports transferability to similar migrant-sending communities, the findings are not statistically generalisable to Malawi as a whole. Secondly, interview and FGD data relied on the retrospective and self-reported perceptions of PEAs, head teachers, teachers and learners, the findings may be subject to recall bias, particularly around sensitive matters such as household chores and disruptive behaviour. Finally, the perspectives of migrant parents themselves, most of whom were in South Africa at the time of data collection, fell outside the scope of the study; the findings therefore reflect the experiences of those who remained in Malawi rather than a fully triangulated account inclusive of migrant parents' own views and intentions.



Directions for future research

- Longitudinal, mixed-methods research tracking the academic trajectories of left-behind children over multiple academic years, combining qualitative accounts with standardised attendance and performance data.
- Evaluative research tracking the implementation and effectiveness of local by-laws and multi-sectoral interventions, such as the M'mbelwa by-law discussed in this study, once formally enacted.
- Comparative study of the long-term effects of parental out-migration on children's educational outcomes in Mzimba and Mangochi Districts, both of which have long histories of labour migration to South Africa.

CONCLUSION

The study findings paint a sobering picture of a community caught between economic survival and educational sacrifice. While remittances undeniably ease household poverty, they simultaneously erode the very foundation upon which children's futures are built. The evidence is unambiguous: chronic absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, and premature dropout, particularly among boys, are not incidental occurrences but predictable outcomes of prolonged parental absence. What emerges most starkly is that economic remittance without emotional and supervisory presence is an incomplete investment in a child's future. If Mzimba, and by extension similar migrant-sending communities across Malawi, is to break this cycle, deliberate and coordinated action is required. The study affirms that no amount of remitted wealth can substitute for the presence, guidance, and care that only an engaged parent can provide, and it is this absence, more than any other factor, that quietly determines whether a child in Mzimba District reaches Standard Eight or joins the growing ranks of those who do not.

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