

The Psychosocial Impact of Albinism on Learners' Academic Performance. A Case of Reigate District in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90300037>

Received: 16 February 2025; Accepted: 24 February 2025; Published: 27 March 2025

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the work was to evaluate the psychosocial impact of albinism on learners' academic performance, using a case study of Bulawayo schools, mainly Reigate District. The study employed a qualitative approach to understand the psychosocial impact on academic albinism learners. Data collection was through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. According to the findings, three-quarters of the learners with albinism confirmed had low self-esteem and one quarter stated discrimination, while some stated lack of confidence to be one of the major challenges faced at school. The recommendations included having patience with albinism learners when teaching them, and facilitation of special learning aids in schools, among others.

Key terms: Mental, Health, Albinism, Education, Stress, Learners, Psychosocial.

INTRODUCTION

One group of people whose difference affects them academically is the learners living with albinism. This group experiences low self-esteem and faces challenges in their academic performances. The stigma, lack of resources in schools, and health challenges have a psychosocial impact on albinism learners, which affects their performance in academics. Moreover, Wan (2003) [11] states that their difference in appearance may lead to both psychological and physical victimizations like bullying and name-calling by students, including teachers. As a result, albinism pupils experience challenges in schools.

The world views people living with albinism almost in a similar way. Albinism is a group of related inherited conditions from mutated genes, which causes a complete or slight absence of melanin pigment formed in the skin, hair, and/or eyes (Baker et al., 2010) [2]. As a result, people living with albinism might suffer from poor visual acuity termed oculocutaneous albinism, and get pale skin and sandy-colored hair. He goes further to explain that people living with albinism might be considered "legally blind" because of their level of visual acuity, even though, they can do activities like reading and even driving. In general, society has little knowledge about albinism. Hence, people living with albinism are surrounded by myths and stigma and often miss out on opportunities or participation academically.

In Africa, most studies have been focused mainly on the myths of albinism (Burke et al., 2014) [3]. This probed the researcher to shift focus and assess the psychosocial impact of albinism on academic performance. Much concern is on the way children with albinism are segregated. After the Uganda Albino Persons Association was interviewed, it was discovered that in terms of insufficient funds, families would choose not to educate a child with albinism, which would lead to segregation and a high illiteracy rate among people living with albinism (Allen, 2012) [1].

Furthermore, statistics from Malawi display a higher percentage of enrolled boys forty-eight (48) to girls twenty-two (22) in schools (Lynch and Lund, 2011) [8]. This then gives rise to the question of how different the boy child and girl child living with albinism to accessing education when they are all subject to the same condition. All these mentioned factors, create a gap and cause psychological and social effect in children with albinism and might affect their performance education-wise.

According to (Lund, 2001) [6], reports from Southern Africa, state several cases of bullying, name-calling, and social problems that exist in learners living with albinism, with these psychological impacts on albinism leading to poor academic performance. Besides the psychological impact affecting academic performance, learners living with albinism are disadvantaged in terms of learning facilities. Ideally, people with albinism would require special schools with special resources to limit their exposure to sunlight but the education system in Zimbabwe is structured in such a way that children with albinism learn in mainstream schools within their communities (Lund, 2000) [5]. This implies that there are no special facilities or special care for the learners living with albinism, who end up being affected in their academics. As evidence, even though albinism is associated with poor vision, affected children in Zimbabwe are incorporated into mainstream schools with untrained staff to educate visually impaired children. The classrooms and play areas are also not adjusted to meet their needs. Children may perform poorly before the teachers can detect the problem (Lund, 2001) [6].

As asserted by (Noah, 2021) [9], another view of the psychosocial impact of albinism emanates from society's attitude. In addition, the report states that having albinism causes an emotional impact on some of the children with albinism, although it differs per individual and according to different stages. Furthermore, (Noah, 2021) [9], explains the psychosocial impact to be an experience of isolation and rejection by society because of the difference in appearance. At times, even families can fail to acknowledge children with albinism, causing them to feel unloved. These emotions from society, family, and friends, coupled with teasing at school, lead to stress, and lack of concentration and eventually disturb the children in their academics. In support, a study done by Ezeilo (1989) [4], reveals that from personality, people living with albinism have emotional instability as compared to those without albinism.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. To assess the psychosocial impact of albinism on academic performance of learners' in Bulawayo schools (Reigate District).
2. To understand how low self-esteem affects learners in their academic performance.
3. To investigate the challenges faced by learners with albinism.
4. To describe the measures by the local authorities in implementing a change in the educational capacity for learners with albinism in schools.

METHOD

Population

The target population of the study were primary and secondary students living with albinism, school teachers and caregivers of the children in Reigate District.

Sample and sampling techniques

The sample consisted of 12 learners living with albinism, 12 caregivers, and 8 teachers from 8 schools which were 2 primary schools and 6 secondary schools. Two different sampling techniques were used because of the differences in the groups that were to be interviewed. The sampling approach used on learners with albinism was snowball sampling, while the one used on both teachers and family members for the learners with albinism was purposive sampling.

Data gathering instrument

Face-to-face interviews, Telephone interviews, and focus groups were used to collect data from the population. This was a conversational method, which invited opportunities to get in-depth details from respondents. This method allowed the researcher to probe for more information if need be

Procedure

Permission was sought from the Bulawayo schools' authorities to conduct the study. The researcher liaised with school heads from the selected schools, who communicated to the teachers of concern, those who teach classes with learners with albinism. Before the learners could be informed, the family members (guardians) of the learners with albinism had to be informed first for consent.

Design

The researcher used a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, which is developed from a qualitative methodological paradigm. The focus of this design is on capturing experiences as explained by participants, which in this case are learners with albinism, together with their family members and teachers. This design was chosen because the researcher can collect information according to participants' points of view while understanding their lived experiences (Soeker et al., 2015) [10].

Data analysis

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Ethical Considerations

Ethics matter as they adhere to human rights, dignity, and integrity, the participation should be voluntary, informed, and safe for participants. The researcher sought a letter from the school that allowed her to get permission to carry out the research. Informed consent was sought from the participants before they participated in the study. The participants were informed at first about the purpose of the study and they gave their consent to the participant. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured by the researcher to the respondents.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Low self-esteem and academic performance in learners with albinism

The researcher was required to know if learners living with albinism were of low self-esteem, hence after gathering the demographic information, the researcher explained what self-esteem meant to learners, and the learner was asked a series of questions that would assess their self-esteem. The expected answer was a yes or a no. Follow-up questions would guide the learner to speak about the challenges they face at school and how they perform to their low self-esteem.

Low self-esteem

It was noted that nine (9) learners with albinism reported having low self-esteem, while three (3) reported that they did not have low self-esteem. This high percentage indicates that the learners living with albinism showed to have low self-esteem and that low self-esteem affected them negatively in general and as well as in their academic performance, through psychosocial issues like lack of confidence, among other things. This was further cemented by a mention by the teachers in the Focus Group Discussions that were held. Of the teacher's responses, nine (9) of the participants perceived the learners living with albinism to be having low self-esteem challenges as well. They had this to say:

T3 "These students suffer a lot of discrimination from all angles such that at the end of the day, they ask themselves if they are even worthy of living, and that lessens their being to nothing"

The response noted above from Teacher 3 was similar to the other responses given by other teachers. Therefore, it was noted that there is a relationship between low self-esteem and poor performance in academics. The causes of people living with albinism's low self-esteem can be associated with a lot of factors including how these learners are treated by society, at school, and even in their own families.

Lack of confidence

Three (3) of the learners living with albinism mentioned lack of confidence as a negative factor they encountered. Learner 8 stated that a general lack of confidence in himself affects his performance.

L8 "I rarely raise my hand in class because I have no confidence in myself".

From this response, the researcher noted low self-esteem to be associated with a lack of confidence, which in turn affected academic performance. A similar response was given by Learner 3, who asserted that the lack of confidence she has makes it difficult sometimes to respond to the questions asked by the teachers since she is afraid of being laughed at or mocked. Another response on lack of confidence was from Learner 4 whose concern was mainly on staring. She pointed out how much she gets stared at and how some people want to feel her skin and hair, asking her a lot of questions which makes her lose confidence in herself.

Poor Social Skills

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Being treated differently compared to others

One of the things that stood out in the research, was noted that learners living with albinism felt that they were treated differently from others. This response was given by five (5) of the participants. The response was highlighted in different forms, with the same meaning. For instance, Learner 6 pointed out that the treatment she receives from her friends is different from how they treat each other among themselves. On the other hand, Learner 2 specified her siblings being without albinism and he noticed the difference. She said,

L2 "I am the only albino child in the family and even when growing up, up to now, I would feel that I am different, sometimes it's like my siblings receive better treatment".

On the contrary, L7 spoke of a positive response and treatment.

L7 "I don't have many complaints concerning treatment and responses many people around me treat me with care".

At the same time, Learner 1 pointed out that she is treated with caution, especially in the area where she lives, and that it becomes boring because she does not want pity or to be treated differently. Learner 12, however, was convinced that there was favoritism at school because she has never been considered for anything, be it class monitor selection or being a group leader.

Limitations of the study

The sample was limited to a single district, reigstate in Bulawayo, however, results may be applicable to other places as well with similar characteristics.

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

Discussion

The open-ended questions on challenges faced by learners with albinism gave them room to express themselves fully. It was clear that they faced a lot of challenges, and their challenges were common. There was a pattern of similar terms and thoughts in their responses. Even in the focus group discussion, the responses from teachers echoed the same sentiments raised by the learners. The researcher grouped the various responses into themes, which are presented in detail below.

1) Discrimination: There were three (3) who responded to facing discrimination at school. From the conversations held, L2 highlighted that there was a lot of discrimination she experienced at school especially when it concerned group work,

L2 “When tasked to work in groups, I am usually the last to be approached”.

When asked how she felt about that, he further responded to say that,

L2 “I get discouraged most of the time and feel like no one wants to work with me”.

Another response on discrimination was from L8, who highlighted being a newcomer at school and experiencing discrimination in terms of hanging out,

L8 “During lunch breaks people will be in their groups and I just sit alone or with a friend who has recently befriended me. I am even afraid of trying to mingle because of how I was treated in my previous school”.

Another three (3), perceived the learners living with albinism to be facing discrimination at school.

“Albinism is rare and the albino learners have no other people like them around them. Because of that, they face a lot of discrimination at school and get affected in their performance since the environment is uncomfortable for them”, said T4.

On the contrary, T2 stated that although the learners living with albinism faced discrimination, this made some of them have more concentration on their studies,

“As much as they face discrimination, from what I notice from my learner is that she tends to be alone most of the time and makes use of that time studying. So maybe she puts all her emotions and pain into focusing at school”.

From what was said, the researcher discovered that not all challenges made the learners living with albinism lose focus at school.

2) Bullying and Teasing: There were three (3) who responded to facing discrimination at school. From the conversations held, L2 highlighted that there was a lot of discrimination she experienced at school especially when it concerned group work,

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3) Unavailability of special resources: Another two (2) of the learners with albinism participants mentioned a challenge concerning reading on the board in class. Among the responses, L1 revealed having challenges with her eyesight,

“I have challenges especially reading from afar and I have since opted to sit in front of the class near the board, which is uncomfortable because I have already been given names”. Moreover, L5 concurred saying, “it is straining to read work written on the board and when the teachers help me on that by writing on paper or making me sit in front, it makes me feel different from the rest”.

From those who deemed the unavailability of special resources to be a challenge, only 1(8.3%) highlighted no special resources for learners living with albinism in schools.

“There are no available resources in schools for people like us to help us visually or to protect our skin. For example, I do Sciences and have challenges especially when doing practical subjects. There are some chemicals that I react to and there is no special resource for that”.

The respondents seemed concerned about the lack of aides in schools to help them read and write as fast as others.

Recommendation

- 1) Patience: Teachers need to be patient with albinism learners, having time to understand them since they have different challenges like poor eyesight, being color blind, and being slow in some activities.
- 2) Provision of learning aides: There should be learning aids for albinism children in every school so are not disadvantaged.
- 3) Extra Lessons: Besides normal class activities, albinism children need extra lessons so that those with less confidence when in large numbers can have time to learn in smaller groups of people.
- 4) Equal Treatment: Parents need to give their albinism children attention and time. This way they establish a relationship and the children get to open up about the different challenges they experience. They don't feel different from the other children.

5) Equal Opportunities: The albinism children need to be treated equally as any other child. This manages their self-esteem, boosts their confidence, and makes them feel comfortable. And they feel they have an equal opportunity just like everyone else.

Conclusion

These are some of the thoughts that came from the study which both the participants and the researcher believe could make the life of learners with Albinism better.

Awareness: There should be lessons in schools on albinism, as this will help other students gain knowledge and have a better understanding of their colleagues living with albinism. Teachers and other officers found in schools also need to be trained on how to handle and treat learners with albinism. Occasionally there should be albinism awareness campaigns, especially during assembly days so that others can have information and learn about us. One learner said “Mina ngokubona kwami ngcono kube lezikolo zethu sodwa right” This suggested that there must be specific schools for the people living with albinism. This way, learners living with albinism might be free and confident to learn without being teased and they will get full attention from their teachers as well as make sure that learners with albinism are catered for in terms of resources they need, especially for visual. Another suggested encouraging people living with albinism to enroll in teaching and train to be teachers so they may come in schools and work there as they take proper care of their colleagues. This might as well give some of the learners with albinism who lack confidence a sense of motivation.

General encouragement: A response of four , were of the strategy of general encouragement to learners with albinism. “From my point of view, learners living with albinism are fragile and they need all sorts of encouragement to boost their self-esteem. In this way, it will make them like the school environment and put more effort into their work”, as ascertained by T2. T6, however, was certain that this encouragement was not supposed to be from teachers only but even from other learners,

“I have an albino learner who is slow and sometimes they feel neglected if they do not receive encouragement, therefore I think the peers should learn how to treat them and encourage them without scorning them”.

Provision of optical aides:

There were three who highlighted the strategy to provide learners living with albinism with optical aids. These were named to be either visual glasses, magnifying glasses for class purposes, or anything that helped them to see properly when reading. T8 pointed out that, “Not everyone can afford spectacles, but if schools could chip in and have these visual facilities, then it will ensure no learner living with albinism is disadvantaged in class”. In addition, T3 stated that,

“Implementing optical aids of any sort for the learners living with albinism will keep them motivated, as it is, they are demotivated”.

Provision of special trained teachers in all schools for learners living with albinism: The other four mentioned improvements in terms of teacher training. According to L7, “It is very necessary that every school should have teachers with knowledge on how to deal with albino learners”. Another statement given by L5 about the training of teachers during their studies is,

“From what I think, teachers should receive initial training on how to deal and understand albino learners during their studies before they even come for teaching practice. This ensures that almost every teacher will be fully equipped with knowledge about albinos”.

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