

Barriers to access: why some children with albinism in Malawi are not attending school

This research has been funded until May 2014 by the [British Academy \(http://www.britac.ac.uk/\)](http://www.britac.ac.uk/). The lead researcher is Dr Pat Lund from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences in Coventry University who has led multi-disciplinary studies in southern Africa over 18 years. She will be working in collaboration with Dr Paul Lynch from the School of Education, University of Birmingham, who is an expert in the education of visually impaired children. They will be working closely with the Malawian Ministry of Education and the charities Sightsavers and The Albino Association of Malawi (TAAM).

Albinism in an African context

Children with albinism in Africa lack pigment in their hair, skin and eyes, making them strikingly different from their black peers. This inherited condition results in poor vision due to a combination of eye problems that often go unrecognised, but cause numerous difficulties in the classroom, making mobility, seeing the chalkboard, reading and writing difficult and limiting participation in outdoor sporting and leisure activities. Albinism can have a negative impact on achievement at school, particularly if teachers fail to adopt strategies to assist these pupils. Compounding these restrictions, people with albinism often experience rejection and exclusion due to myths and ignorance about albinism, leading to bullying and other problems of social integration.

Responding to the inadequate educational provision for children with visual impairment, the Ministry of Education, with the support of international charities such as Sightsavers (<http://www.sightsavers.org> (<http://www.sightsavers.org/>)) have set up resources centres with specialist teachers to support their learning. There are an estimated 4-5000 people in Malawi have albinism, most of them young, but currently only 72 children with albinism are attending resource centres. As most of these educational programmes are in the south of the country, some areas in the north have not benefited from these specialist services. The Albino Association of Malawi (TAAM) has identified young people with albinism in rural areas who are not attending school. The findings of the proposed study will facilitate local advocacy programmes and enable both governmental agencies and charities to improve their educational services, enabling them to target their support more effectively and efficiently.

Aims

This study builds on previous research by the co-applicants in Malawi and aims to identify the key determinants preventing young people with albinism from accessing education in five rural villages in northern Malawi. Community beliefs about albinism will be documented as these must be taken into consideration when adapting educational policy for this vulnerable group.

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The evidence from this study will inform the development of co-ordinated and sustainable educational programmes, including this disadvantaged and vulnerable group of children with albinism and helping to ensure they achieve their full potential at school. This will directly affect their future job prospects and opportunities.

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