Article

"It Is My Responsibility to Escort My Child to School …" Factors Influencing Parental Involvement in Educating Children with Disabilities in Malawi

David John Musendo [1,]*, Maria Zuurmond [1], Thomas Andrea Nkhonjera [2], Sarah Polack [1] and Daksha Patel [3]

[1] International Centre for Evidence in Disability, Department of Population Health, Faculty of Epidemiology and Population Health, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London WC1E 7HT, UK; mariazuurmond@gmail.com (M.Z.); sarah.polack@lshtm.ac.uk (S.P.)

[2] Department of Social and Political Sciences, School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, UK; thomasnkhonjera@yahoo.com

[3] International Eye Health Centre, Department of Clinical Research, Faculty of Infectious and Tropical Diseases, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London WC1E 7HT, UK

* Correspondence: john.musendo@lshtm.ac.uk; Tel.: +44-7775-727-007

Abstract: This study aimed to explore the factors that influence parental involvement in supporting the education of children with disabilities in Malawi, thereby generating insights into the barriers and facilitators they face. We conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with 25 participants from Nkhata Bay District: teachers, parents, and children with disabilities. We used the COM-B model to analyse how parents' capabilities, opportunities, and behaviours influence their involvement in their children's education. This study revealed that parents of children with disabilities showed willingness, optimism regarding their children's future, and a strong sense of responsibility for their education. However, factors such as the limited knowledge of children's learning needs, time, low confidence, and financial challenges have constrained their involvement. Schools and communities frequently limit participation opportunities by not consistently practising or championing parental involvement in policies and actions. This study sheds light on the complex interplay between knowledge, practical constraints, and external support systems that shape parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities. Further research aimed at creating tailored and context-relevant interventions to improve parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities in low-income settings is required.

Keywords: parent or family involvement; children with disabilities; school; parent-teacher relationships; education; COM-B model

1. Introduction

There are approximately 240 million children with disabilities worldwide, with more than half residing in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Olusanya et al. 2022; UNICEF 2021). These children face significant challenges in accessing education, social services, and healthcare, often leading to economic marginalisation and poor living conditions (Mbazzi et al. 2021; Male and Wodon 2017). In the education sector, children with disabilities require additional support and resources (Wondim et al. 2021). However, they are less likely to attend school and more prone to dropping out than their peers without disabilities (Kuper et al. 2014; Foreman-Murray et al. 2022; Tanya Lereya et al. 2022). These educational exclusions have long-term negative effects, including limited economic opportunities and persistent poverty (Banks et al. 2017).

Parental involvement is critical for improving the educational outcomes of children with disabilities. However, the level of involvement differs for parents of children with disabilities, especially those from rural and poor communities, as they are more prone to constrained financial resources and truncated social networks (Singal 2016). In this paper,

we refer to 'parents' more broadly to include individuals with parental responsibility and other carers or guardians of children or young people, including relatives or adults residing in the same home (Persson 2019). Several studies have emphasised the importance of stronger relationships between professionals and parents, advocating for a family-centric approach to delivering educational services (Goldman and Burke 2017; Lendrum et al. 2015). Parental involvement encompasses various forms, including parenting at home, communicating with schools, volunteering, learning at home, participating in school decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Alflasi et al. 2018; El Nokali et al. 2010; Epstein 2018; Roy and Giraldo-García 2018). Despite this, parents of children with disabilities face numerous challenges, including financial constraints, negative societal attitudes, and inadequate community and policy support, particularly in low-income settings (Bani Odeh and Lach 2024; Abu-Ras et al. 2018).

Parental beliefs and caregiving methods vary significantly across cultural contexts (Lansford 2022). Therefore, research focusing on parental involvement in diverse settings and contexts is crucial for deepening our understanding of this critical aspect of education. Most studies on parental involvement have concentrated on high-income settings (Musendo et al. 2023), resulting in a lack of understanding of the unique challenges and needs of parents in low-income settings, including Malawi (Garcia et al. 2020).

Estimates of the prevalence of disability among school-aged children in Malawi range from 0.43% to 5.60% (Mizunoya et al. 2018). Parents of children with disabilities in Malawi, a low-income country in sub-Saharan Africa, face many challenges in accessing and providing adequate support for children with disabilities, particularly in rural areas, where 84% of the population lives (National Statistics Office 2019). The Malawian government has emphasised the importance of disability-inclusive education. However, significant barriers remain, including limited parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities (Pasidya and Murugan 2023; Banks et al. 2022). A growing body of literature examines the significance of parental involvement in the education of children in general (Lee 2022; Pasidya and Murugan 2023) and issues surrounding disability inclusion in education in Malawi (Banks et al. 2022; Banks and Zuurmond 2015; Braathen and Munthali 2016; Chitiyo et al. 2019; Mbewe et al. 2021; Singal et al. 2021; Tataryn et al. 2017) However, research that specifically focuses on the factors that influence parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities in Malawi and other LMICs is lacking.

This study utilised the capability–opportunity–motivation–behaviour (COM-B) model (Michie et al. 2011) to explore factors influencing parental involvement. This model is a comprehensive framework at the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) hub, designed to understand behaviours and identify intervention targets. According to the COM-B model, individuals must have physical and psychological capabilities, social and physical opportunities, and motivation to engage in a specific behaviour over other options or competing behaviours (Atkins and Michie 2015). These three components interact with each other, with capability and opportunity influencing motivation (see Figure 1).

The COM-B model is helpful because it integrates the psychological, social and environmental dimensions, making it versatile for exploring and developing behaviour change interventions in different contexts (Murphy et al. 2023; Ojo et al. 2019; Flannery et al. 2018; Erzse et al. 2022; Oporia et al. 2023). For instance, Murphy et al. (2023) utilised COM-B to inform the development of an intervention targeting women with gestational diabetes (Murphy et al. 2023). Ojo et al. (2019) used it to identify barriers to reducing sitting time among office workers (Ojo et al. 2019). Flannery et al. (2018) used COM-B to explore physical activity behaviours in overweight pregnant women (Flannery et al. 2018). Erzse et al. (2022) utilised the COM-B framework to inform interventions to enhance healthy eating and physical activity among youth in Cameroon and South Africa (Erzse et al. 2022). Oporia et al. (2023) employed the model in Uganda to design an intervention to encourage the use of life jackets among boaters (Oporia et al. 2023).
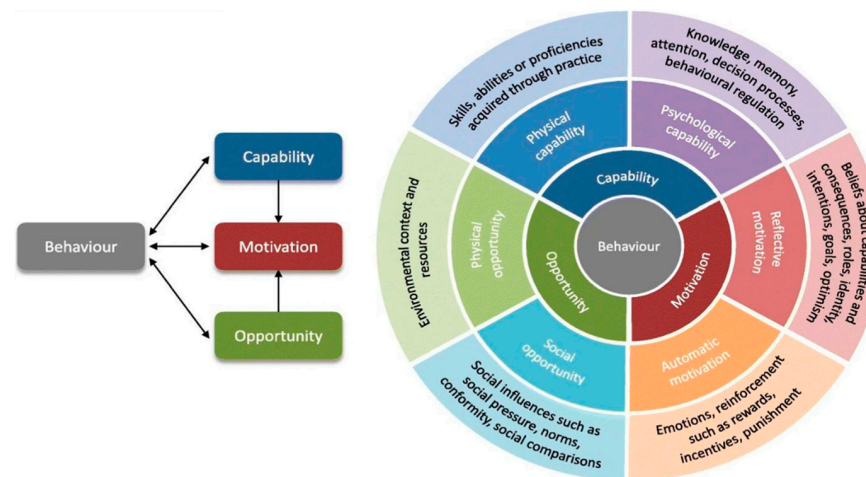
Figure 1. The COM-B Model developed by Michie et al. (2011).

Studies of parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities have typically focused on high-income settings (Musendo et al. 2023). Findings from those studies are not necessarily generalisable to low-income settings, where community dynamics, resources, and diverse cultural perspectives may operate and interact differently (Patton 2000). There is a lack of evidence concerning the unique cultural, social, and financial factors influencing parental involvement in different low-income countries, such as rural areas of Malawi (McLinden et al. 2018). Such information is needed to inform the development of targeted, context-appropriate interventions to improve educational opportunities for children with disabilities. The COM-B model is a potentially helpful framework for addressing this knowledge gap by facilitating comprehensive insights into the psychosocial, social, and environmental factors influencing parental engagement to inform intervention development (Chin 2010).

This study aimed to explore the factors influencing parental involvement and support in educating children with disabilities in Malawi. The study objectives were to assess parents' ability to support children's education, explore opportunities for parental involvement, and understand the motivational factors influencing parental engagement in educating children with disabilities. The research questions that guided the study in Malawi were as follows: (1) What are the capabilities of parents to support the education of their children with disabilities? (2) What opportunities exist for parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities? (3) How do motivational factors influence parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This exploratory qualitative study was based on an interpretive research paradigm that aimed to understand and interpret the nuanced experiences and perspectives of parents, teachers, and children with disabilities concerning parental involvement in education. The interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to recognise and narrate the meanings associated with human experiences by exploring the experiences and perceptions of a particular social context (Alharahsheh and Pius 2020). Focus groups and in-depth interviews aligned well with our study's objectives in this sociocultural setting (Patton 2000). Based on the COM-B model (Michie et al. 2011), this design offers the flexibility to investigate the interactions between capability, opportunity, and motivation in shaping parental behaviours in a rural, low-income context, such as Malawi (Ahmed 2024).

2.2. Setting

This study was conducted in two rural primary schools in Nkhata Bay, a district in Malawi. The district economy relies heavily on agriculture, fishing, forestry, local commerce, and tourism, with approximately 18% of the population classified as 'ultra-poor' (Government of Malawi 2020). According to the most recent census of 2018 in Malawi, approximately 5400 children aged five years or older with disabilities live in this district (National Statistics Office 2019). The two schools were selected based on their eligibility to participate in a new inclusive education project serving families and children with disabilities delivered by the Church of the Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Education Department.

2.3. Participants and Recruitment

The study included children with disabilities aged 10–16 who attended primary school, their parents or caregivers, and schoolteachers. Staff from the local Inclusive Education Project, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2017) and a local programme for persons with disabilities in the Nkhata Bay District, recommended recruiting participants from two local primary schools. We contacted the principals of the two primary schools who agreed to participate in this study. We sought to recruit a study sample that included diverse roles (e.g., parents, teachers, or children), a range of disability types (e.g., visual, hearing, and physical disabilities), gender balance, as well as different socioeconomic backgrounds and levels of prior engagement with schools. Only parents of school-aged children with disabilities enrolled in participating schools at the time of the study were eligible to participate. Teachers were also considered eligible if they had children with disabilities in their classes.

The school principals worked with their senior teachers and school committee members to identify parents who met the criteria and provided the research team with a list of eligible names. The research team made personal invitations to the 25 listed people, all of whom agreed to participate. Children were eligible if they faced significant difficulty or limitations in performing specified daily activities, as assessed by the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning (WG-SS) (Washington Group 2020). Six children with disabilities (3f, 3m), eleven parents (7f, 4m), and nine teachers (5f, 4m) agreed to participate in this study. The final sample included six children aged between 10 and 16 years with physical, hearing, and vision impairments and their parents (Table 1). No children of the eligible age range with intellectual or learning disabilities were identified by the teachers in the two study schools. Among the parents and caregivers, nine were biological parents of children with disabilities (6f, 3m), and the remaining two were an aunt and an uncle. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of participants' characteristics.

Table 1. Description of the participants' characteristics.

Participants	Characteristics	Frequency
Sex (25)	Female	14
	Male	11
Participants' Category (25)	Parents (6 mothers, 3 fathers)	9
	Caregivers (1 aunt and 1 uncle)	2
	Teachers (5f)	9
	Children with disabilities (3 females)	6
Child disability Type (6)	Vision	2
	Hearing	2
	Physical	2

Table 1. *Cont.*

Participants	Characteristics	Frequency
Child age (year)	10	1
	11	1
	13	1
	14	2
	16	1
Education levels for parents/caregivers (11)	Never went to school	3
	Primary education	6
	Secondary education	2

2.4. Data Collection

The lead author collaborated with a team of three research assistants from Malawi to collect the data for this study (2f, 1m). The research assistants participated in a three-day training workshop to ensure a common understanding of the research purpose, data-collection approaches, interview methods, and ethical processes. We then jointly developed semi-structured interview guides based on literature review and consultations with experts in disability and education. We translated these guides into Chichewa and back-translated them to ensure their cultural appropriateness and accuracy. Following consultations with local experts, we adapted the interview guides to align with the local context. LSHTM and University of Livingstonia professionals reviewed and approved the final data collection tools and interview guides. We collected data through focus groups and in-depth interviews with parents, teachers, and children between May and September 2019.

The interview guide questions were developed to align with the main themes of COM-B. For capability, we asked for knowledge and physical capability using questions such as: "How do parents understand their role in supporting their children with disabilities in schooling?" and "Are you able to help with your child's schooling?" If yes, how? What helps? What makes this difficult? For the opportunity theme, we asked, "How does the local environment (e.g., such as schools, community organisations and transport services) influence the support that you can give to your child?" and "Do you [parents] work together to address issues concerning your children's education? If so, how, when, and in what way? If no, what do you think are the reasons why not?" To understand motivation, in particular, beliefs about parental roles and the effects of involvement, we included questions such as: "Do parents believe they provide sufficient support for their children's inclusion?" and "What are the benefits or challenges of getting your parents involved or not involved in your education [as children]?".

While the lead author interviewed teachers, local researchers collected data from parents and children to moderate perceived power imbalances. The discussions and interviews, which lasted 45–60 min each, were held in private spaces in classrooms at the participating schools and were structured to allow participants to share their perspectives. Two Malawian researchers were responsible for obtaining written informed consent from all participants aged 18 years and above and assent, along with consent from guardians or parents of participants under 18, following the ethical guidelines for research involving minors. First, we informed the participants about the study objectives, potential benefits and risks, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. We maintained participant confidentiality, anonymised all data during transcription, and securely stored it, making it accessible only to the research team and in compliance with data protection regulations.

2.5. Data Analysis and Management

We transcribed the audio recordings and translated the Chichewa versions into English for analysis. The authors first familiarised themselves with the data, developed the initial codes, and then discussed them with a local research assistant in Malawi to refine them and

create a comprehensive codebook. We adopted the COM-B model (Michie et al. 2011) to structure the analysis and categorise behavioural determinants into capability, opportunity, and motivation. Based on this model, we identified specific sub-themes that reflected the factors influencing parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities. Table 2 provides the definitions of each COM-B component and outlines the study's themes and sub-themes, clarifying how they align with the original COM-B framework.

Table 2. Definitions of themes and sub-themes based on the COM-B framework.

COM-B Component	Theme/Sub-Theme	Definition (as Applied in This Study)
Capability	Knowledge and understanding	The extent to which parents are aware of and understand their roles in supporting the education of their children with disabilities, including knowledge about disabilities and educational needs.
	Physical capacity	The physical abilities and resources required to participate in their child's education, such as time and energy for school involvement amidst competing daily responsibilities.
Opportunity	School openness and teacher attitudes	The accessibility and supportiveness of schools and teachers in facilitating parental involvement and creating a welcoming environment for parents.
	Parent-to-parent interactions	The availability of social support networks among parents that allow them to share knowledge, offer mutual support, and collaborate on strategies for supporting children with disabilities.
	External support from community	Assistance from community leaders, organisations, or other external sources that enables or encourages parental engagement in educational activities.
	Financial demands and priorities	The financial constraints and economic responsibilities that parents face, which can limit their availability and ability to actively support their child's education due to competing priorities.
Motivation	Perceptions of roles and responsibilities	Parents' beliefs about their responsibilities in supporting their child's education, including the importance of their involvement and perceived duties.
	Future optimism and beliefs about education	Parents' attitudes and beliefs about the potential benefits of education for their child's future and the value of investing in their child's education

An iterative coding process was used, resulting in three versions of the codebook and 17 final codes aligned with the three main themes of capability, motivation, and opportunity (see Code Framework Supplementary Figure S1). To ensure coding reliability, an inter-coder agreement was established by multiple researchers (DM, BM, and CK) who independently coded a sample of transcripts. Discrepancies were discussed and reconciled to refine the codebook and ensure consistency in the application of codes across the dataset. The three researchers then systematically applied the codebook to all transcripts using the ATLAS. ti software version 9.0, resolving any variances by discussion. We conducted a thematic analysis guided by the COM-B model, which allowed us to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data related to capability, opportunity, and motivation factors influencing parental involvement. Finally, the team interpreted and synthesised the themes by considering the study objectives and the existing literature.

2.6. Data Reliability and Validity

We adopted several steps to improve data quality and trustworthiness. We gathered perspectives from different participant groups, parents, teachers, and children with dis-

abilities to enable data triangulation and a more comprehensive understanding. The topic guides were developed through discussions with the local research team and pilot-tested. Regular debriefing meetings were held after the interviews to discuss content and key emerging themes and adapt the topic guides as needed, which enabled the exploration of relevant themes. As described above, three researchers conducted data coding independently, including two from Malawi. We also conducted peer debriefing sessions to validate thematic interpretations across the participant groups. Following our data analysis, we presented the preliminary findings to a selection of 23 participants in a one-day workshop in Malawi, where the participants had time to review and verify whether the interpretations appropriately represented their opinions. This step ensured that the findings represented the participants' viewpoints and experiences, thus enhancing the validity of the data (Slettebø 2020).

2.7. Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher engaged in a dual positionality during the study, shifting between an 'outsider' and an 'insider'. Their cultural background from Zimbabwe shared similarities with Malawian communities. However, as a doctoral researcher from a UK-based international institution in the UK, they also occupied an outsider status, which could be viewed as more privileged and as having greater resource access. This background required ongoing reflexivity to address potential power imbalances and facilitate participatory engagement processes. The researcher actively engaged in relational reflexivity by journaling, collaborating with local research assistants, and doing regular debriefs with the study team to critically reflect on how their identity influenced the research process. Adopting a "liquid identity" framework (Yip 2024) enabled the researcher to adapt their approach to ongoing interactions and community dynamics, encouraging trust, cultural sensitivity, and ethical engagement. The support of community leaders and reputable organisations, such as CCAP, helped ensure that the research was culturally informed and inclusive. CCAP's existing connections helped bridge gaps between the researcher and the participants, enhancing credibility and encouraging open dialogue during the data collection. To ensure the independence of the study, the CCAP staff were not involved in data collection and analysis.

3. Results

This section highlights the main factors that influence parental involvement in Malawi, arranged according to the components of the COM-B model: capability, opportunity, and motivation. Nine specific sub-themes were also identified within each component: parents' knowledge and understanding and physical abilities under capability; school accessibility, parent-to-parent interaction, financial obligations, and community support under opportunity; and perceptions of roles and responsibilities, alongside future optimism in motivation.

3.1. Capability

This Section presents the facilitators and barriers to parental involvement related to the capability component of the COM-B model. It highlights the main facilitators of involvement, such as parental knowledge, understanding, and commitment to supporting their children's education, as well as the main challenges, such as competing demands for primary responsibilities and financial constraints.

3.1.1. Knowledge and Understanding

Parents who demonstrated a good understanding of the importance of education appeared to be better equipped to support their children with disabilities. For example, parents with a clear understanding of their responsibilities proactively ensured their children's consistent school attendance and access to the necessary resources. One teacher observed, "Parents understand their responsibility to ensure their children attend school

and receive the supplies they need" (Teacher #02, female). Similarly, some children felt that parents with a deeper understanding of their roles supported their children's learning more actively. For instance, one child stated, "My parents are aware of their responsibility to send me to school. They encourage me to read" (Child #02, male). However, parents with limited literacy skills found it challenging to actively participate in their children's education because of a lack of understanding of their disabilities and how best to support their educational needs and entitlements. As one teacher highlighted, "They [parents] may not know how to care for the child or what the child can have. This may be due to their educational backgrounds. Most parents need better education on these issues to understand their children's needs" (Teacher #02, female). Furthermore, some parents held negative views towards disability, perceiving it as a "punishment from God". Such stereotypes stem from sociocultural pressures discouraging parents from actively helping their children's education.

The level of knowledge and understanding of parental roles and responsibilities in supporting children's education varied. Some caregivers expressed that they understood their roles well, but "this is not the case with many parents here" (Parent #5, female). Similarly, another parent stated, "many parents are unaware of their roles and responsibilities" (Parent #3, female). Teachers and children shared similar thoughts; for example, one child felt that parents needed guidance as "they don't think about it [giving educational support to children] because they are unaware. They are not taught" (Child #3, male). The same sentiments were expressed by another child, who said, "Not most parents support their children with disabilities because they have little knowledge of how and where to go with children with disabilities" (child #4, male).

3.1.2. Physical Capability

Many parents face challenges in supporting their children's education because of the demands of their primary responsibilities, such as farming. They struggle to make time for school-related activities such as teacher consultations. Participants expressed that this was especially true in rural settings, where subsistence farming is the primary occupation of most families. One female parent mentioned, "Since many parents depend on farming, most of their time is spent on farms, and they pay little attention to the education of their children with disabilities" (Parents' focus group). Despite these challenges, some parents were deeply committed to supporting their children's education, ensuring that their children could attend school and that they would provide for their material needs, such as a wheelchair. One female parent, #8, stated, "It is my role to escort my child to school and ensure that their wheelchair is always in good condition". Although this statement reflects a keen sense of responsibility, it suggests that parental involvement is often limited to physical caregiving.

3.2. Opportunity

In this Section, we highlight the positive influence of school openness, parent-to-parent interactions, and external support from the community on parental involvement. However, we also identified challenges such as a lack of structured interactions and widespread community-based interventions that hinder parental engagement.

3.2.1. School Openness and Teacher Attitudes

This study found that proactive engagement by school administrators and teachers positively influences parental involvement. Schools that actively engaged with parents and maintained open communication channels had higher levels of parental involvement. Additionally, school leadership structures such as school management committees and parent groups were important in fostering welcoming and collaborative environments that encourage parental involvement. Reflecting on the school's openness and supportive teacher attitudes, one parent remarked, "There is a good relationship between teachers and parents. Our school has organised committees, such as school management, parent

associations, and mother groups, to oversee the welfare of children with disabilities" (Parent #09, female). However, some parents felt disconnected from their children's education because they did not engage in school activities. A male parent expressed his lack of involvement by saying, "I have not been to my child's school for two years, and I am unaware of any effort to promote my involvement except when the school needed me to contribute funds" (Parent #06, male).

3.2.2. Parent-to-Parent Interactions

Having spaces for interaction between and among parents was identified as influencing positive parental involvement. Such opportunities provided valuable support and allowed parents to share their experiences, which many found beneficial. One parent pointed out, "No man is an island, as the saying goes. Meeting as a group will help us because we can share ideas and find ways to assist parents who struggle to help their children" (Parent #04, male). This statement underscores the potential value of peer-support networks for parents. However, the participants also discussed the lack of formal structures that could facilitate such interactions, indicating an area where policy and school initiatives could have a significant impact. For instance, a child observed, "Parents do not work together here. Everyone is doing things. So, we cannot say that my parents influence others" (Child #06, male). During the focus group with teachers, it was reported that there was no coordinated responsibility to enable structured interactions with the parents. Female Teacher #4 expressed that promoting interaction by parents, teachers, or an organisation would encourage more parents to participate in their children's school activities.

3.2.3. External Support from the Community

Community leaders, such as members of school committees and village heads, commended their positive role in encouraging parents to be more supportive of their children with disabilities. The leaders often conducted follow-ups and questioned parents about whether their children were missing from school. A male parent shared, "The committee helps gain new knowledge and skills to support their children's performance in class better" (Parent #01, male). Despite the positive role of community leaders, not all parents have access to such support, highlighting the need for more structured and widespread community-based interventions. Another male parent reported, "I have never met with any authorities, teachers, community, or other parents concerning my child's education. Maybe because I have just been here for a few months, I have not observed any efforts to get people to work together to support children with disabilities" (Parent #04, male).

3.2.4. Financial Demands and Priorities

Financial demands present another challenge for parental involvement. Most participants indicated that parents from poorer households prioritised their immediate subsistence activities over educational involvement. For example, a male parent stated, 'Parents play a leading role in assisting and supporting their children, but due to limited resources, they often struggle to provide adequate support for their children with disabilities' (Parent #04, male). Generally, there was a consensus that time and financial resources limited the opportunities for parents to become involved in their child's education. Parent #03, female, shared, "We try to support our children's education. But we find it hard to keep our children [in school] because of inadequate resources". The children and teachers also noted this challenge. Male child #2 indicated that "my father does not do anything for my school" due to his busy work schedule. Similarly, male teacher #3 observed that the challenge of meeting the household's basic needs restricted the extent to which parents could be involved: "most parents have to give their children food... [they] always go to their farming areas in the morning and leave the kids alone".

3.3. Motivation

Insights from the interviews highlighted the influence of positive motivational beliefs and perceptions about parental roles, benefits of involvement, and attitudes towards the child's education and future. Understanding these factors is crucial for creating effective strategies for increasing parental engagement in children's education.

3.3.1. Perceptions About Roles and Responsibilities

Teachers highlighted the importance of parents actively communicating their children's needs to the school. Specifically, Teacher #02, a female educator, stressed the importance of proactive parental involvement, stating, "If they notice that their children are facing challenges, parents should make an effort to approach the teacher and provide a comprehensive explanation of the situation". This underscores the mutual responsibility shared between parents and teachers to address the needs of the children. In our discussions, both children and parents agreed that if parents acknowledge their responsibilities as caregivers at home and school, they can provide more support to their children. Understanding and appreciating their roles and responsibilities as caregivers in both environments can help to increase parental involvement in supporting their children.

3.3.2. Future Optimism and Beliefs About Education

Parents' hopefulness for their children's future has been reported to play a significant role in their level of involvement. Those who believed in the long-term benefits of education were more likely to invest their time and resources. For example, female parent #3 stated, "I often stop doing some things and go to support my child's education. This includes activities such as going to the farm and washing clothes. I do so because I want her to rely on herself in the future". Optimism often translates to higher levels of involvement. One child mentioned, 'Our performance will improve if our parents help us, and we will score good grades after writing primary school exams' (Child #05, male).

Parental beliefs and perceptions regarding education have also been reported to influence motivation. One parent (#10, Female) stated their passion for their "child to continue with education despite his disability", although they struggle with "knowledge and understanding of what and how I can help". Likewise, male Teacher #3 noted that some parents "do not feel confident" engaging with schools; and male Child #6 also remarked that "Even though it is possible to get them involved, they don't have the confidence." These insights, observed by parents, teachers, and children, highlight the need for parental self-confidence and motivation to foster positive interactions with schools and to enhance motivation for engagement.

4. Discussion

This section analyses and discusses the results concerning our research objectives and the existing literature. We also emphasise the unique challenges and similarities of Malawian parents compared to those of other low-income countries. Additionally, we discuss the implications of our findings for policy, practice, and future research. Overall, our study highlights the interaction between capability, opportunity, and motivation as factors influencing parental involvement. The findings suggest that the parental level of knowledge and understanding of disability-related issues can directly influence their ability to access and utilise resources and support systems that are available to them. This insight emphasises the important link between parents' understanding around disability and their capacity to leverage resources (capability) and the support systems accessible to them (opportunity). Such interactions in turn affect their motivation to participate more actively in their children's education. Therefore, parents who were more aware of and had better access to supportive environments were more motivated to participate. By contrast, those with limited resources showed lower levels of involvement.

4.1. Capability to Get Involved

Previous research has indicated a correlation between enhanced parental knowledge or understanding of issues affecting children and greater participation and involvement (Durisic and Bunijevac 2017; Paget et al. 2016). In contrast, studies in Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia have suggested that negative attitudes towards disabilities hinder parental involvement (Yip 2024; Durisic and Bunijevac 2017; Paget et al. 2016). Additionally, our study findings align with a case study of a low-income school community in South Africa that found that time constraints and work demands, such as farming, negatively influence parents' ability to support their children's education (Ikechukwu 2017). Thus, there is a need for more educational programmes designed to help families of children with disabilities better understand their children and improve their understanding of disabilities and their roles in the educational process (Jang et al. 2023; Kim 2024). The perception of disability as a divine punishment that is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, in some settings, also shapes parental attitudes and behaviours (Babik and Gardner 2021). This view not only affects the amount of support that parents can offer to their children but also reinforces societal stigma, which results in further marginalisation of children with disabilities. For example, a study reviewing the identification of preschool children with disabilities in resource-constrained settings, including Malawi, suggested that children with disabilities are sometimes hidden at home because of societal stigma, local beliefs about the causes of disabilities, and insufficient information available to both professionals and parents (Lynch et al. 2024).

Interventions must incorporate culturally sensitive approaches to challenge deep-seated beliefs (Jang et al. 2023). Research in similar low-income settings has demonstrated that community-based education programmes involving religious and cultural leaders can be pivotal in shifting harmful narratives and promoting inclusive attitudes (Mbazzi et al. 2020; Harrison et al. 2020). These programmes can help to reframe the role of community support in enabling disability inclusion rather than disability being viewed through the lens of cultural stigma.

4.2. Opportunities for Involvement

This study suggests that opportunities for parental involvement are shaped by the interplay between school openness, community support, and financial constraints. Schools with proactive engagement strategies had higher levels of parental involvement. This is consistent with previous research indicating the importance of positive school–home relationships (Fishman and Nickerson 2014; Minke et al. 2015). Schools with proactive engagement strategies and positive teacher attitudes tend to have higher levels of parental involvement, as observed in Malawi and other African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania (Masulani-Mwale et al. 2018a, 2018b; Merryness and Rupia 2022). Consistent and structured engagement opportunities are essential to enhance parental involvement.

Collaboration and interactions among parents, teachers, and the wider community were considered essential for parental involvement; although, our study found that these were limited. Enhancing communication and establishing structured collaborative processes are paramount for parental involvement in the education of children with (Mwarari et al. 2020; Mortier et al. 2009). Research has shown that positive teacher–parent relationships and strong community ties enhance parental involvement and support for children (Chima Abimbola Eden and Adeniyi 2024). For instance, support from teachers with positive attitudes towards parental involvement can create a supportive environment that fosters trust, self-efficacy, and motivation (Minke et al. 2015; Katenga 2017). Children's educational support is likely to be higher if parents feel invited and welcome to school (Fishman and Nickerson 2014). The positive impact of community leaders and the potential for peer support highlight the need for more robust collaborative interventions and peer support systems for parents (Nalugya et al. 2023; Bray et al. 2017; Zuurmond et al. 2019).

Caring for family members and children with disabilities can be complex (Abu-Ras et al. 2018) The finding in our study that parents from lower-income households found it particularly challenging to prioritise the education of children with disabilities in the face of

competing priorities aligns with other recent studies in LMICs (Mactaggart et al. 2018; Banks et al. 2017). Participants frequently mentioned prioritising essential resources, highlighting how the household's financial situation can either enhance or limit parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities. This aligns with other studies, for example, in Nigeria and Ghana, that found that in the context of economic hardships, parents were forced to prioritise immediate subsistence activities over educational involvement (Abdu-Raheem 2015; Merryness and Rupia 2022). Addressing these economic barriers requires a multifaceted approach, including community-based support systems that can alleviate the financial burden on families (Baker et al. 2016). Recognising the considerable time constraints faced by parents, flexible interventions are needed to support their children's education while balancing their income-generating activities.

4.3. Motivation for Involvement

Positive perceptions of parental roles, beliefs about the benefits of involvement, and optimistic attitudes towards the education of children with disabilities were the primary drivers of parental involvement. Parents who viewed involvement as part of their responsibilities were more engaged. This is consistent with research in other contexts which found that positive parental attitudes and high aspirations for their children's future could help increase their involvement (Ishimaru 2017; Park and Holloway 2018; Jeynes 2016). In addition, in our study, optimism about the children's future was described as a strong motivation for their involvement, consistent with previous studies (Foreman-Murray et al. 2022; Atkins and Michie 2015). Mizunoya et al. (2018) noted that parents decide whether to send their children to school based on how much they value education, the cost of schooling, the opportunities their children miss by going to school, how they value their time, and the benefits they expect from education (Mizunoya et al. 2018). These findings also align with another recent study in Malawi and Bangladesh that reported caregivers' recognition of the importance of school for their children's future livelihoods or at least as a means of socialisation (Aruldas et al. 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to recognise and enhance these motivating factors when developing interventions for parental involvement.

4.4. Shared and Unique Perceptions Expressed by Parents, Teachers and Children

This study observed similarities and differences in perceptions among parents, teachers, and children regarding the factors that influence parental involvement in their context. All three participant groups—parents, teachers, and children—identified resources or financial constraints and high work demands as significant barriers to parental involvement. For example, the children expressed their appreciation for the support provided by their parents as well as noting that their parents' work commitments restricted their ability to participate consistently in their education. Teachers, parents, and children with disabilities often highlighted the insufficient capabilities, including knowledge and confidence, among parents in supporting their children's education. Stigma within the community emerged as a shared concern among parents and teachers, with both groups emphasising the need for better opportunities for interactions between schools and the community. Differences arose concerning the responsibility for parent–teacher interaction. Parents wanted schools to adopt a more proactive approach to creating engagement opportunities, whereas teachers contended that parents should assume greater responsibility in initiating contact with schools. Participants articulated a strong motivation to engage, highlighting their sense of responsibility and desire for deeper involvement. They acknowledged the necessity of acquiring the knowledge and skills to support their children effectively.

4.5. Comparison with Other Countries

The difficulties experienced by parents in Malawi in supporting the education of children with disabilities are unique and comparable to those encountered in low-income environments. For instance, economic hardships, as experienced in countries like Nigeria and Ghana, often force parents to prioritise immediate subsistence over educational

involvement, limiting their capacity to support their children's education (Abdu-Raheem 2015; Merryness and Rupia 2022). Additionally, challenges relating to cultural stigma surrounding disabilities are also observed in other countries such as Bangladesh, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Mbewe et al. 2021; Paget et al. 2016; Kim 2024; Mbazzi et al. 2020; Hameed et al. 2024; Harrison et al. 2020). Furthermore, while Malawi's inclusive education policies face implementation challenges, similar struggles have been observed in Kenya, India, and Tanzania, where resource limitations and inadequate teacher training have hindered parental engagement (Singal 2016; Merryness and Rupia 2022).

Community-led initiatives have been successful in countries such as Uganda, Ghana, and Brazil (Zuurmond et al. 2018; Nalugya et al. 2023; Smythe et al. 2019), highlighting the need for similar approaches to encourage parental involvement in Malawi. For example, literacy programmes involving parents and community members have been implemented to enhance educational outcomes in some LMICs (Spier et al. 2016). In Uganda, the "Obuntu bulamu" peer support model was designed to offer emotional and practical assistance to parents of children with disabilities, thus lessening stigma and promoting greater inclusion (Mbazzi et al. 2020). In Ghana, a community-driven intervention helped enhance caregiver resilience and offered important alternative social support networks (Zuurmond et al. 2019). Collaborative efforts between families, schools, and communities engaging parents in decision-making have also effectively promoted inclusive educational practices (Ishimaru 2017). These models and examples also show the potential opportunities for civil society organisations, such as the CCAP's Education Programs in Malawi, to develop family-focused interventions to enhance parental support through targeted intervention.

4.6. Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths that enhance the robustness and credibility of its findings. Including diverse participants, such as children with disabilities, their parents, and teachers, offers a comprehensive view of the factors that affect parental involvement. This approach enhances the validity of the findings through triangulation (Palikara et al. 2018). Furthermore, utilising the COM-B model as a theoretical framework allows for multifaceted analysis of the factors that impact parental involvement. This model provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of parental involvement. The application of this model adds depth to the study and helps to examine the intricate web of factors that influence parental involvement.

Notably, the universal applicability of COM-B, especially in low-income countries and settings, remains uncertain. The model originated from high-income contexts, and therefore, it may only and, to an extent, partially draw into Malawi's cultural beliefs, economic constraints, and other systemic barriers. For instance, the model's assumption that individual and environmental factors primarily drive behavioural change potentially overlooks the influence of communal practices and social norms, which are particularly significant in Malawian society. Additionally, the model may not adequately address the role of external systemic factors, such as limited infrastructure and resources in rural Malawi, which can severely restrict parental involvement regardless of the individual capabilities or motivations of parents in these settings (Mbazzi et al. 2020; Banks et al. 2017; Kuper et al. 2014).

Another limitation of the study is the inherent selection bias that could have been introduced by engaging school principals, teachers, and community leaders to identify study participants. Although specific criteria were set, relying on a purposefully selected group of parents, teachers, and children may have resulted in a nonrepresentative sample of the general population. This study included children of a range of ages, with physical, hearing, and vision impairments. However, no children with intellectual or learning disabilities, or their parents, were identified for the study, which means we cannot generalise our findings to this group. This should be addressed in future research to ensure more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences related to parental involvement.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides a foundational understanding of the complex factors influencing parental involvement in Malawi, offering actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders aiming to enhance educational outcomes for children with disabilities. This study contributes to the understanding of parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities in low-income settings, particularly in Malawi. By exploring unique challenges and facilitators within this context, such as cultural beliefs, financial constraints, and the role of community support, this study highlights the critical need for tailored interventions. The implications of this study are profound, in terms of both policy and practice.

Findings from this study underscore the need for targeted interventions that enhance parental literacy and understanding of disabilities, improve access to resources and support systems, and shift societal attitudes through community engagement. Parent-focused interventions should address barriers, such as enhancing parental literacy, fostering positive school–home relationships, and establishing structured peer support systems, all designed with recognition of the time constraints faced by these parents. Future research should focus on developing and testing culturally sensitive intervention strategies that account for the reality of low-income families. Specifically, studies should explore the effectiveness of community-based programmes that involve local leaders and religious figures in shifting societal attitudes towards disability.

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