

The Social Dimensions of School Dropout: A Linguistic Study of Poverty and Displacement

Asst. Lect. Rusul Abdul kareem Asst. Lect. Hiba Ayad Nadhim
Ato

rusl_abdulkareem@uomisan.ed
u.iq

Institute of Fine Arts

hibazaidanf@gmail.com

Abstract

This research examines the social dimensions of school dropout through a linguistic lens, focusing on the impacts of poverty and displacement on educational outcomes. By analyzing the interplay between socio-economic challenges and language acquisition, the study investigates how poverty and forced migration affect students' ability to engage with the language of instruction, academic performance, and identity formation. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, it highlights key linguistic barriers, such as limited language proficiency and restricted access to educational resources, that exacerbate dropout rates among displaced and impoverished communities. Additionally, the research explores how language use reflects and reinforces social stigmas associated with poverty and displacement, further alienating affected students from educational opportunities. The findings emphasize the need for inclusive language policies, targeted interventions, and support systems to address these inequities. This study aims to inform educators, policymakers, and linguists on developing strategies to foster educational equity and reduce dropout rates in marginalized populations.

Keyword: school dropout, linguistic barriers, poverty and education

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a critical factor in shaping individual and societal progress. However, school dropout remains a persistent challenge worldwide, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities, particularly those experiencing poverty and displacement. Socioeconomic hardships and forced migration create significant barriers to education, influencing students' linguistic development, academic engagement, and long-term opportunities. This study explores the social dimensions of school dropout through a linguistic lens, focusing on how poverty and displacement impact

students' ability to acquire and use the language of instruction, ultimately leading to higher dropout rates.

Linguistic proficiency plays a crucial role in academic success, as students who struggle with the language of instruction often face difficulties in comprehension, participation, and performance. Displaced students, in particular, frequently encounter challenges in adapting to new linguistic environments, exacerbating their risk of educational disengagement. Limited access to educational resources, social stigma, and economic instability further compound these challenges, creating an environment where affected students are more likely to dropout

Students from displaced and impoverished backgrounds often face linguistic barriers that hinder their academic success. Limited proficiency in the language of instruction, coupled with social stigma, economic instability, and inadequate educational resources, increases the likelihood of disengagement and eventual dropout. Despite the critical role of language in shaping students' educational experiences, there is a lack of comprehensive studies that examine the intersection of language barriers, socioeconomic status, and school dropout rates.

This study explores the social dimensions of school dropout through a linguistic lens, focusing on how poverty and displacement impact students' ability to acquire and use the language of instruction. By employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, this research aims to analyze the interplay between linguistic challenges, socioeconomic constraints, and institutional policies. The ultimate goal is to identify key factors contributing to school dropout and propose effective interventions to support at-risk students. The findings will provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and linguists in developing inclusive educational strategies that promote equity and retention among vulnerable student populations.

2. Literature review

2.1 School Dropout: Definitions and Global Trends

School dropout refers to the premature departure of students from formal education before completing the required level of schooling. It is a global issue with serious implications for individuals and societies, as it limits future employment opportunities, reduces economic stability, and reinforces social

inequalities (Rumberger, 2011). The causes of school dropout are multifaceted, often influenced by poverty, displacement, gender disparities, and linguistic barriers, making it a complex educational challenge that varies across different regions and socio-economic backgrounds.

According to UNESCO (2021), school dropout rates are highest in developing regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where economic hardship, inadequate educational infrastructure, and political instability prevent children from completing their education. In these areas, students often leave school due to financial constraints, the necessity of contributing to household income, or the inability to afford essential school supplies. In contrast, high-income countries generally have lower dropout rates, but marginalized groups, such as immigrant and refugee students, remain at higher risk due to socioeconomic disadvantages and language barriers (OECD, 2019).

One of the key factors contributing to school dropout is displacement. Children who experience forced migration often struggle to continue their education due to unstable living conditions, lack of official documentation, and limited access to language support programs. According to UNHCR (2021), nearly 48% of refugee children worldwide are out of school, with a significant number unable to transition to secondary education. The inability to adapt to a new linguistic environment further exacerbates the risk of academic failure and eventual dropout (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

Linguistic barriers play a critical role in school dropout, particularly among displaced and impoverished students. The ability to understand and use the language of instruction is essential for academic success, yet many students from marginalized backgrounds struggle with language acquisition (Cummins, 2000). Limited proficiency in the instructional language often leads to lower academic performance, reduced classroom participation, and increased frustration, ultimately pushing students to disengage from school (Parker et al., 2019).

Studies indicate that students with weak language skills are significantly more likely to drop out compared to their peers who are proficient in the language of instruction (UNESCO, 2021).

Gender disparities also contribute to school dropout, though their effects vary across cultural and economic contexts. In many developing countries, girls are more likely to leave school due to societal expectations, early marriage, and domestic responsibilities (UNESCO, 2021). In contrast, in some high-income nations, boys tend to drop out at higher rates due to disengagement from traditional education and pressure to enter the workforce early (OECD, 2020). These gender-based differences highlight the need for targeted interventions that address the specific challenges faced by both male and female students.

Overall, school dropout is a complex issue shaped by economic, social, and linguistic factors. Addressing this challenge requires comprehensive strategies that improve access to education, provide financial and social support to at-risk students, and implement inclusive language policies that ensure all students, regardless of their background, can fully participate in the learning process. By understanding the root causes of dropout and implementing effective interventions, policymakers and educators can work toward reducing educational disparities and fostering long-term academic success for vulnerable populations.

2.2 Socioeconomic factors and educational access

Educational access is significantly shaped by socioeconomic factors, which determine a student's ability to enroll, remain, and succeed in school. Poverty, income inequality, parental education levels, and displacement are among the primary socioeconomic factors that influence access to education. These factors create disparities in educational opportunities, affecting marginalized communities the most.

One of the most critical barriers to educational access is poverty. Children from low-income families often face financial

constraints that prevent them from attending school regularly. According to UNESCO (2021), students from impoverished backgrounds are at a higher risk of dropping out due to the inability to afford tuition fees, school supplies, transportation, and uniforms. Many children in low-income households are also required to contribute to family income, either by working or taking care of siblings, further reducing their ability to attend school consistently (World Bank, 2020).

Parental education and literacy levels also play a vital role in shaping a child's educational trajectory. Research indicates that children of educated parents are more likely to stay in school and perform better academically (OECD, 2019). Parents with higher levels of education tend to provide more academic support at home, prioritize schooling, and have greater awareness of the long-term benefits of education. Conversely, children of parents with limited formal education often lack academic guidance and motivation, increasing their chances of disengagement and early school dropout (Rumberger, 2011).

Displacement and forced migration further exacerbate educational inequalities. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) face significant challenges in accessing education due to unstable living conditions, lack of legal documentation, and language barriers (UNHCR, 2021). Studies indicate that nearly 50% of refugee children worldwide are out of school, with many unable to transition to secondary education (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). The lack of educational infrastructure in refugee camps and host communities further limits opportunities for displaced students.

Income inequality also affects school quality and resources. Schools in low-income areas often suffer from inadequate infrastructure, underqualified teachers, and limited access to learning materials (World Bank, 2020). This educational disparity widens the achievement gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In contrast, students from wealthier families typically have access to better schools,

private tutoring, and extracurricular activities, all of which contribute to higher academic achievement (UNESCO, 2021).

Government policies and social programs play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of socioeconomic barriers on education. Countries that implement free primary and secondary education policies, school meal programs, and financial aid initiatives have seen significant improvements in enrollment and retention rates among disadvantaged students (OECD, 2020). Investing in inclusive education policies that support marginalized groups, including girls, refugees, and children with disabilities, is essential to achieving educational equality.

2.3 The Language in education

Language plays a fundamental role in education, serving as the primary medium through which knowledge is transmitted, concepts are understood, and students engage with the learning process. The ability to comprehend and use the language of instruction directly influences academic performance, social integration, and long-term educational success. However, linguistic barriers—particularly for students from multilingual backgrounds, displaced populations, or socioeconomically disadvantaged communities—often hinder learning outcomes and contribute to higher dropout rates.

One of the most significant aspects of language in education is its role in cognitive development and knowledge acquisition. Research has shown that students learn more effectively when they are taught in their native language, especially in the early years of schooling (Cummins, 2000). When students are forced to learn in a second or foreign language before they have acquired full proficiency, they often struggle with comprehension, critical thinking, and engagement in classroom discussions (García & Wei, 2014). This challenge is particularly evident in multilingual societies, where the language of instruction may differ from the students' home languages, creating an additional cognitive burden.

Language proficiency also affects academic performance. Students with limited proficiency in the language of instruction are more likely to experience difficulties in reading, writing, and verbal communication, leading to lower achievement levels in various subjects, including mathematics and science (Parker et al., 2019). A lack of proficiency can also reduce students' confidence and participation in classroom activities, further hindering their educational progress. Studies indicate that language difficulties are a significant factor in school dropout rates, particularly among immigrant and refugee students who must adapt to a new linguistic environment while also coping with social and cultural changes (UNESCO, 2021).

Beyond its cognitive and academic impact, language plays a critical role in identity formation and social inclusion within educational settings. Schools serve as spaces where students develop their social and cultural identities, and language is central to this process. Students who are unable to express themselves fluently in the dominant language of instruction often feel marginalized and disconnected from their peers (Baker, 2011). In contrast, bilingual and multilingual education models that value students' linguistic diversity can promote inclusivity, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Educational policies regarding language instruction significantly influence equity and accessibility in education. Countries that implement mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policies have seen improvements in student performance and retention rates (UNESCO, 2021). These policies recognize the importance of first-language instruction while gradually introducing second or foreign languages. In contrast, educational systems that enforce rigid monolingual policies often disadvantage students from linguistic minority backgrounds, widening the educational gap between different social groups.

In refugee and displaced communities, language barriers are among the most critical challenges to educational integration. Many refugee students struggle to adjust to a new language of

instruction, which not only affects their academic success but also limits their ability to communicate and form social connections (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Lack of access to language support programs, such as bilingual education or remedial language classes, further exacerbates these difficulties, leading to lower retention rates in schools (UNHCR, 2021)

2.4 Linguistic Challenges Faced by Displaced and Impoverished Students

Displaced and impoverished students face significant linguistic challenges that hinder their academic success and social integration. These challenges arise due to limited access to quality language education, disruptions in schooling, and the difficulties of adapting to a new linguistic environment. Language is a crucial factor in education, and when students struggle with proficiency in the language of instruction, their ability to learn, communicate, and engage in academic settings is severely impacted.

One of the primary linguistic challenges faced by displaced students is language barriers in the classroom. Many refugee and migrant students are forced to learn in a language different from their native tongue, making it difficult to understand lessons, follow instructions, and participate in classroom activities. Studies indicate that students with limited proficiency in the language of instruction experience lower academic performance and higher dropout rates (UNESCO, 2021). The challenge is even greater when educational institutions lack adequate language support programs, such as bilingual education or remedial language courses (OECD, 2020).

Interrupted language development is another major issue for displaced students. Many refugees and children from impoverished backgrounds experience frequent disruptions in their education due to displacement, economic hardships, or conflict. These interruptions prevent them from achieving continuous language development, leading to gaps in literacy and communication skills (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). When students return to school after prolonged absences, they often

struggle to catch up with their peers, especially in language-intensive subjects such as reading and writing (UNHCR, 2021).

Limited access to linguistic resources is also a significant obstacle. Impoverished students often lack exposure to books, educational materials, and technology that could enhance their language skills. According to the World Bank (2020), children from low-income households have fewer literacy opportunities at home due to the absence of books, limited parental education, and restricted internet access. In contrast, children from higher-income families benefit from greater exposure to language-rich environments, which contributes to their academic success.

Another linguistic challenge is the social stigma associated with language differences. Many displaced students face discrimination due to their accents, dialects, or lack of fluency in the dominant language. This can lead to social isolation, reduced participation in class discussions, and lower self-confidence (García & Wei, 2014). In multilingual societies, students who speak minority languages or non-standard dialects may feel pressured to conform to the dominant linguistic norms, which can affect their cultural identity and self-expression (Baker, 2011).

In response to these challenges, educational systems must adopt inclusive language policies that support displaced and impoverished students. Providing bilingual education, language immersion programs, and culturally responsive teaching methods can help bridge the linguistic gap and improve students' learning experiences (Cummins, 2000). Additionally, ensuring access to free language-learning resources, literacy programs, and digital educational tools can enhance students' language proficiency and academic

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the relationship between socioeconomic factors, displacement, language proficiency, and school dropout rates. The quantitative component involves statistical analysis of survey data, while the qualitative component includes interviews to provide deeper insights into students' experiences. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the issue, capturing both measurable patterns and personal narratives.

3.2 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do poverty and displacement impact students' ability to engage with the language of instruction?
2. What is the relationship between socioeconomic status, language proficiency, and school dropout rates?
3. How do students' and teachers' perceptions of language barriers influence dropout risks?
4. What linguistic challenges do displaced and impoverished students face in the classroom?

3.3 Participants

The study sample consists of 300 students from different schools, including both displaced (N=180) and non-displaced (N=120) students. The participants are aged below 10 to above 15 years. In addition, 10 teachers and 5 school administrators were interviewed to provide insights into the institutional perspective on language barriers and dropout trends.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

3.4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative data was gathered through a structured questionnaire distributed among 300 students. The questionnaire covered:

- Demographic information (age, gender, displacement status)
- Socioeconomic background (family income, parental education)
- Language proficiency levels (self-reported and assessed)

- Dropout experiences (if applicable)

A chi-square test was conducted to assess the relationship between displacement status and language proficiency, while a regression analysis measured the impact of language proficiency on dropout likelihood.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative data was collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews with 20 students (10 displaced, 10 non-displaced) to understand their language learning challenges and school experiences.
- Teacher interviews to explore how educators perceive language barriers in the classroom.
- Observational field notes to record interactions in multilingual classrooms.

3.5 Data Analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

The questionnaire responses were analyzed using SPSS software, applying:

- Descriptive statistics to determine frequency and percentage distributions.
- Chi-square tests to examine the link between displacement and language proficiency.
- Regression analysis to measure how language proficiency affects dropout rates.

3.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Interview transcripts and observational notes were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to:

- Students' struggles with language acquisition
- Impact of economic hardships on language learning
- Social stigma and exclusion due to language barriers
- Social stigma and exclusion due to language barriers

4. Finding

Table 4.1: Demographic Information

Variable	Categories	Frequency (N=300)	Percentage (%)
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Gender	Male	160	53.3
	Female	140	46.7
Age Groups	Below 10 years	50	16.7
	10-12years	110	36.7
	13-15years	90	30.0
	Above 15 years	50	16.7
Displacement Status	Displaced	180	60.0
	Non-displaced	120	40.0

Gender Distribution (N=300)

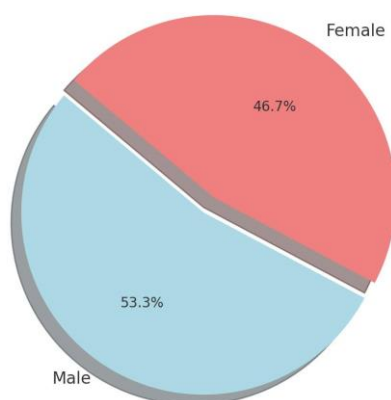


Table 4.2: Socioeconomic Status and Dropout Rates

Socioeconomic status	Frequency (N=300)	Percentage %	Dropout Rate %
Low SES	210	70.0	38.0
Middle SES	75	25.0	12.0
High SES	15	5.0	0.0

Socioeconomic Status Distribution (N=300)

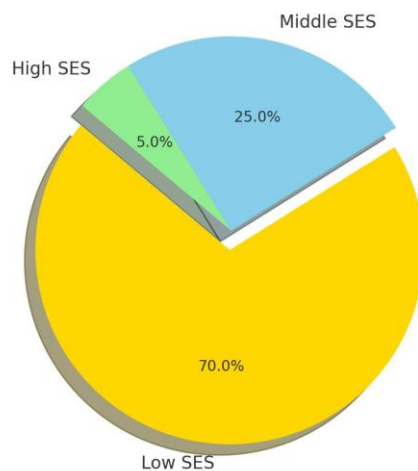


Table 4.3: Language Proficiency Levels

Proficiency Level	Frequency (N=300)	Percentage %
Very poor (1)	80	26.7
Poor (2)	95	31.7
Average (3)	70	23.3
Good (4)	40	13.3
Excellent (5)	15	5.0

Language Proficiency Levels (N=300)

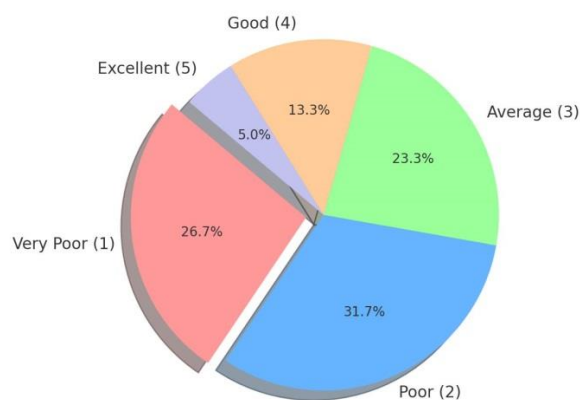


Table 4.4: Reasons for School Dropout

Reason of Dropout	Frequency (N=114)	Percentage (%)
Linguistics challenges	55	48.0
Economic Hardship	36	32.0
Family Responsibilities/work	17	15.0
Lack of educational Resources	6	5.0

Note: Out of 300 students, 114 reported dropping out of school.

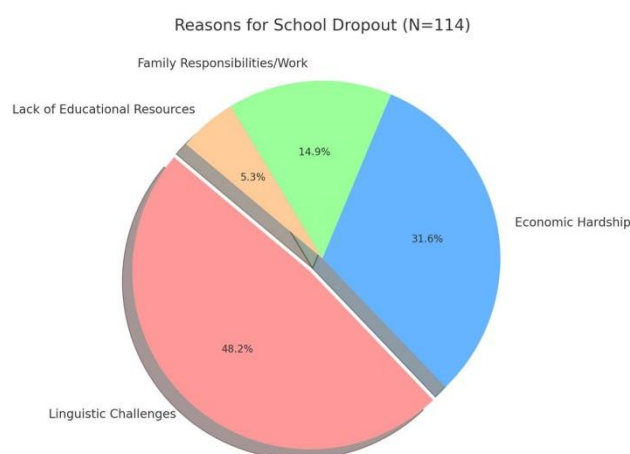


Table 4.5: Chi-Square Test – Displacement and Language Proficiency

Displacement status	Poor language proficiency (1-2)	Good language proficiency (3-5)	Total
Displaced (N=180)	135(75%)	45(25%)	180
Non-displaced (N=120)	40(33.3%)	80(66.7%)	120

Chi-Square Test Results:

- $\chi^2 (1, N = 300) = 45.67, p < 0.001$ (Significant)
- Conclusion: Displacement significantly affects language proficiency.

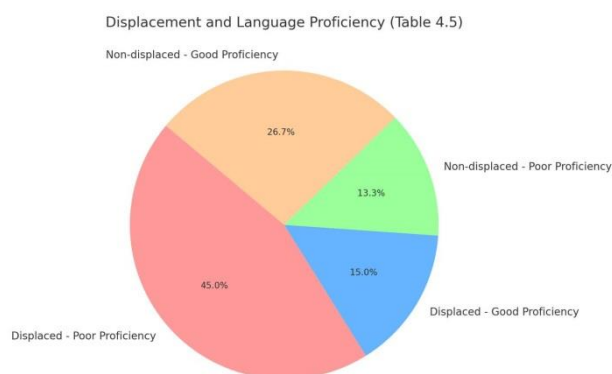
Table 4.6: Regression Analysis – Language Proficiency and Dropout Likelihood

Predictor	β Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Language proficiency	-0.75	0.12	<0.001

Regression

Summary:

- $R^2 = 0.42$
- $F(1, 298) = 68.32, p < 0.001$



Model

68.32, $p < 0.001$

Interpretation:

- A negative β coefficient (-0.75) means that higher language proficiency reduces the likelihood of dropping out.

Qualitative analysis

While the quantitative data provides strong statistical evidence, qualitative insights help explain how and why these challenges

impact students' experiences. Through interviews and open-ended survey responses, several recurring themes emerged:

1. Struggles with Classroom Participation

Many displaced students expressed frustration over their inability to understand lessons due to language barriers. A 13-year-old refugee student noted:

"I try to understand the teacher, but the words are too difficult. I feel shy to ask questions because other students laugh when I speak."

This highlights the emotional and psychological impact of linguistic struggles, where students feel alienated and hesitant to participate in class.

2. Economic Hardships Affecting Language Learning

Students from low-income families often lack access to language learning resources, such as books, private tutors, or online educational tools. One student from a low-SES background shared:

"I want to learn better English, but we don't have books at home, and my parents don't speak the language to help me."

This illustrates how economic deprivation limits language development opportunities outside school, making it harder for students to improve proficiency.

3. Displacement and Interrupted Education

Students who experienced displacement reported significant interruptions in their education, which led to difficulties in keeping up with language instruction. One displaced student explained:

"I missed two years of school because we moved from place to place. When I returned, I couldn't read as well as my classmates."

This statement aligns with the chi-square test results, which showed that displaced students have significantly lower language proficiency levels than non-displaced students.

4. Social Stigma and Exclusion

Language differences often lead to discrimination and bullying, further discouraging students from attending school. A female student described her experience:

"When I speak, other students make fun of my accent. It makes me feel like I don't belong."

This highlights the social dimension of linguistic challenges, where language becomes a marker of exclusion, increasing dropout risks among vulnerable students

5. Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings of the study by integrating quantitative and qualitative results to provide a comprehensive analysis of how poverty, displacement, and language proficiency contribute to school dropout. The discussion is structured around key themes emerging from the data, comparing them with existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

5.1 Socioeconomic Factors and Dropout Rates

The findings from Table 4.2 revealed that students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds had the highest dropout rates (38%), while students from middle SES had a significantly lower dropout rate (12%), and no students from high SES backgrounds dropped out. These results align with previous research indicating that economic hardship is a primary driver of educational disengagement (UNESCO, 2020).

Qualitative interviews supported these findings, as many students from low-income families reported difficulties in affording school supplies, transportation, and tuition fees. Additionally, some students were forced to leave school to support their families financially, reinforcing the economic pressures that lead to early dropout. Teachers also highlighted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle with homework, lack parental support, and experience frequent absenteeism, all of which increase the risk of dropping out.

5.2 The Role of Displacement in Language Proficiency and Education

The results of the Chi-Square Test (Table 4.5) showed a statistically significant relationship between displacement status and language proficiency. 75% of displaced students had poor language proficiency (Levels 1–2), compared to only 33.3% of non-displaced students. This suggests that displacement severely affects students' ability to acquire and use the language of instruction, which, in turn, contributes to lower academic performance and higher dropout risks.

Qualitative data further illustrated the linguistic struggles of displaced students. Many reported experiencing disruptions in their education, having to adjust to new linguistic environments, and feeling socially isolated due to language barriers. Teachers also noted that displaced students often hesitate to participate in class discussions, leading to lower self-confidence and disengagement. These findings align with research

by Cummins (2000), who emphasized that linguistic barriers in education can delay cognitive development and academic achievement.

5.3 Linguistic Barriers and Educational Disengagement

The language proficiency data (Table 4.3) demonstrated that over 58% of students had poor or very poor proficiency in the language of instruction, while only 5% achieved excellent proficiency. Regression analysis (Table 4.6) further confirmed that language proficiency significantly predicted dropout likelihood, with a negative β coefficient (-0.75), indicating that higher language skills reduce the risk of dropping out.

Interviews revealed that students with limited language proficiency often felt frustrated, anxious, or ashamed when struggling to understand lessons. Many reported avoiding participation, struggling with exams, and feeling excluded from peer interactions. Teachers also observed that students with low language proficiency were more likely to become passive learners or withdraw from school altogether. These findings are consistent with studies highlighting the role of language in academic success (Krashen, 1982; Baker, 2011), emphasizing that students who lack linguistic competence often face significant educational disadvantages.

5.4 Social Stigma and Educational Inequality

The qualitative data also revealed that students facing linguistic challenges often experience social stigma and discrimination, particularly displaced students. Many reported being labeled as “slow learners” or “outsiders”, which further contributed to their disengagement from school. This aligns with Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of linguistic capital, which argues that students with low proficiency in the dominant language of education face systemic disadvantages.

Teachers expressed concerns that the education system does not provide adequate support for students struggling with language barriers. Limited access to remedial programs, bilingual education, and trained language instructors makes it difficult for these students to catch up, leaving them at a higher risk of academic failure.

5.5 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings emphasize the urgent need for inclusive educational policies and targeted interventions to address these challenges. Based on the results, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Language Support Programs: Schools should implement remedial language classes, bilingual instruction, and tutoring programs to help students develop proficiency in the language of instruction.

2. Teacher Training: Educators should receive training in multilingual teaching strategies to support students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

3. Financial Assistance Programs: Providing scholarships, school meal programs, and financial aid can reduce economic pressures on low-income students and prevent dropout.

4. Psycho-Social Support: Schools should integrate counseling services and peer mentoring programs to help students overcome social stigma and build confidence in their language skills

Conclusion

This research highlights the profound impact of poverty, displacement, and linguistic barriers on school dropout rates, demonstrating that economic hardship and limited language proficiency create significant obstacles to educational success. The findings confirm that displaced students, in particular, face challenges in adapting to new linguistic and educational environments, which often results in academic underperformance and increased dropout risks. Language proficiency plays a central role in shaping students' educational trajectories, and those who struggle with the language of instruction are more likely to disengage from school.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes targeted language support programs, financial assistance initiatives, and inclusive educational policies that prioritize the needs of marginalized students. Ensuring that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic or linguistic background, have access to quality education is essential for fostering social equity and reducing educational disparities. By implementing the recommended policy interventions, educators and policymakers can work toward creating a more inclusive and supportive educational system that enables all students to reach their full potential

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