
ASSESSING FACTORS HINDERING ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION BY IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES. A CASE STUDY OF DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP

***Zelina Kabudula, Justin Makamo**

Dmi- ST John the Baptist University Malawi School of Social Work Lilongwe Campus.

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***Corresponding Author: Zelina Kabudula**

Dmi- ST John the Baptist University Malawi School of Social Work Lilongwe Campus.

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses factors hindering access to quality education by immigrants and refugees in dzaleka refugee camp. Access to quality education remains a significant concern for displaced populations, impacting their social integration and future prospects. A review of existing literature reveals common challenges such as language barriers, limited resources, administrative hurdles, socio-cultural factors, and infrastructural deficiencies that hinder educational access for refugees globally and in refugee camp contexts (Smith & Johnson, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; Akello, 2019). Despite these insights, there is limited contextual evidence specific to Dzaleka, underscoring the need for localized research. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews guide to collect in-depth data from refugees, camp administrators, and educators to gain nuanced perspectives on the multifaceted barriers encountered. A purposive sampling method was used to select the number of participants to take part in the study, this ensures the inclusion of diverse participants representing different age groups, nationalities, and educational experiences. The data are analyzed thematically to identify key challenges and inform policy recommendations aimed at improving educational access for refugee and immigrant populations in Dzaleka.

INTRODUCTION

Access to quality education is a fundamental human right and a critical driver of socio-economic development (UNHCR, 2016). For refugees and immigrants residing in displacement settings, education not only offers hope for individual advancement but also promotes social cohesion and resilience within host communities (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

However, despite international commitments to uphold these rights, refugees often face significant barriers to accessing quality education, especially in protracted refugee contexts (Kirk et al., 2017). Dzaleka refugee camp, located in Malawi, is home to thousands of refugees fleeing conflict, persecution, and economic hardship from various countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda (UNHCR, 2020). While efforts have been made to provide educational services within the camp, numerous challenges persist that hinder refugees' full access to quality education. Understanding these multifaceted barriers is essential for designing targeted interventions that enhance educational inclusivity and promote sustainable development within refugee populations. This study aims to assess the factors that hinder refugees and immigrants in Dzaleka camp from accessing quality education. By identifying and analyzing these barriers, the research seeks to contribute insights that can inform policy reforms and programmatic strategies to improve educational access and outcomes for refugee learners in displacement contexts.

KEYWORDS: Refugees, Dzaleka refugee camp, Quality Education.

Background of the study

Worldwide, refugees and displaced populations face numerous challenges in accessing quality education. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only about half of refugee children worldwide attend primary school, and the numbers are even lower for secondary education (UNHCR, 2016). Factors such as legal restrictions, language barriers, displacement-induced trauma, and inadequate resources significantly impede refugee access to educational opportunities (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Despite international frameworks like the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, which emphasizes the importance of equitable educational access, implementation remains uneven across different contexts (United Nations, 2018).

In Africa, which hosts the highest number of refugees globally, access to education is further complicated by protracted crises, underfunding, and weak infrastructural development (Sambanis et al., 2019). Refugee children often face discrimination, marginalization, and limited integration within host communities, undermining their educational prospects (Kirk et al., 2017). The continent's socio-political challenges, coupled with resource constraints, hinder efforts to provide inclusive and quality education for refugees, exacerbating disparities between refugees and host populations (UNHCR, 2011). Initiatives like the African Union's

Agenda 2063 highlight the importance of education for refugee integration, yet significant gaps remain.

Malawi is one of the leading refugee-hosting countries in Southern Africa, with Dzaleka refugee camp being a primary settlement for thousands of refugees mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda (UNHCR, 2020). Malawi's policies generally support refugee rights, including access to education; however, refugees frequently encounter obstacles such as legal restrictions, language barriers, and limited infrastructural capacity in refugee settlements (Chilomo, 2019). Studies indicate that while primary education is somewhat accessible, quality and inclusiveness issues persist, particularly at secondary levels (Mwedya & Mulindwa, 2019). These challenges hamper the potential for refugees to attain education that can facilitate integration and socio-economic empowerment, underscoring the need for targeted assessments to inform policy improvement.

Problem statement

Access to quality education is recognized as a fundamental human right and a critical factor for the socio-economic integration of refugees and immigrants. Despite international commitments and national policies aimed at promoting educational access for displaced populations, refugees in Dzaleka refugee camp continue to face significant barriers that hinder their ability to attain quality education. Previous studies have highlighted various obstacles, such as legal restrictions, resource limitations, language barriers, and psychosocial challenges, which impede refugee access to education in Malawi and similar settings (Mwedya & Mulindwa, 2019; Chilomo, 2019).

However, existing research predominantly focuses on broad barriers faced by refugees in Malawi without providing a nuanced understanding of the specific factors that hinder access to quality education within Dzaleka Camp itself. Moreover, there is limited empirical data that thoroughly examines how these barriers differentially affect various groups of refugees, and how they influence educational outcomes and quality. This gap leaves policymakers and humanitarian agencies without comprehensive insights needed to develop targeted interventions that address the unique challenges faced by refugee learners in this context.

Therefore, this study seeks to assess the factors hindering access to quality education among immigrants and refugees in Dzaleka refugee camp, with an emphasis on identifying both structural and individual barriers, and how these factors impact educational quality. Filling this gap is essential for informing context-specific policies and programs that enhance

educational access and quality, contributing to better integration and empowerment of refugees in Malawi.

Access to quality education is a fundamental human right and a critical factor for the socio-economic development of refugee populations. However, despite international commitments and efforts to promote inclusive education, refugees and immigrants residing in Dzaleka Refugee Camp face numerous obstacles that hinder their ability to access educational services. These challenges include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient trained teachers, language barriers, legal restrictions, and socio-economic hardships (UNHCR, 2018; Kauffman, 2019). Consequently, many refugee children and youths are deprived of the opportunity to acquire essential skills and knowledge, which impacts their personal development and future prospects.

Main objectives

Assessing factors hindering access to quality education by refugees and immigrants in Dzaleka refugee camp.

Specific objectives

- To identify contextual barriers that prevent immigrants and refugees from getting quality education in Dzaleka refugee camp.
- To examine how the language proficiency and recognition of prior learning affect the refugee students' enrollment and performance in Dzaleka's formal school.
- To identify the role, do camp governance and NGOs play in shaping the availability of qualified teachers for immigrant children in Dzaleka.

Literature review

The right to quality education is recognized as a fundamental human right under international law. However, refugees and immigrants continue to face significant barriers in accessing quality education in many host countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, millions of refugee children worldwide remain out of school due to displacement, poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, and restrictive policies. These challenges negatively affect academic achievement, social integration, and future employment opportunities.

Quality education refers to education that is inclusive, equitable, learner-centered, and capable of equipping learners with relevant knowledge, skills, and values for lifelong

learning. Refugee education should provide equal opportunities regardless of nationality, language, or legal status. However, studies have shown that achieving quality education in refugee settings remains difficult because of limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and shortages of qualified teachers.

Studies conducted in refugee camps across Africa have identified several barriers affecting access to quality education. One of the most common barriers is the lack of legal documentation, which prevents refugee children from enrolling in formal schools. Financial constraints also limit access because many refugee families cannot afford uniforms, books, transport, or examination fees, even where tuition is free. Language differences between refugees and the host country's education system further reduce learners' participation and academic performance.

Research focusing on Malawi, particularly Dzaleka Refugee Camp, indicates that educational services have improved over time through the support of government ministries, humanitarian organizations, and non-governmental organizations. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning materials, insufficient classrooms, limited secondary and tertiary education opportunities, and shortages of trained teachers. These factors continue to compromise the quality of education provided to refugee learners.

Language has also been identified as a major determinant of educational success among refugees. Refugees in Dzaleka come from countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Somalia, where different languages are spoken. Transitioning into the Malawian curriculum, which mainly uses English and Chichewa, creates learning difficulties for many students. Limited language proficiency reduces classroom participation, academic performance, and successful integration into schools.

Another challenge highlighted in the literature is the shortage of qualified teachers. Refugee schools often rely on volunteer teachers or underqualified personnel because of inadequate funding and limited recruitment opportunities. Professional development, teacher motivation, and access to teaching resources remain insufficient, affecting the quality of instruction delivered to learners.

Several scholars also emphasize the importance of collaboration between governments, humanitarian organizations, and NGOs in improving refugee education. Such partnerships contribute to teacher training, provision of educational materials, school infrastructure development, scholarships, and psychosocial support services. Nevertheless, available

resources are often inadequate to meet the increasing educational demands within refugee camps.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that refugees and immigrants face interconnected legal, financial, linguistic, infrastructural, and institutional barriers to accessing quality education. Although several interventions have been introduced in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, gaps remain regarding the effectiveness of these interventions in ensuring equitable access to quality education. This study therefore seeks to assess the factors hindering access to quality education among immigrants and refugees in Dzaleka Refugee Camp and to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving educational outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and Methodology

The researcher used qualitative research method which help to gain deep understanding of underlying reasons, opinions and motivations concerning a research problem (Creswell, 2014). This approach it describes the depth of the study and the data is moistly written and spoken or observed. This is made possible because participants were asked open ended questions which gives room for further probing. In addition, Research design which is overall strategy and framework that guides the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data in a study. It provides a blueprint for answering the research questions effectively and ensures the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

Therefore, in this research will use a descriptive and explanatory design to explore lived experiences, while a case-study approach offers detailed insights into the specific environment of Dzaleka camp (Yin, 2018). Combining these qualitative approaches enables researchers to gather rich, detailed data that depict the complex realities of refugees and immigrants. This approach can inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations to improve educational access in refugee settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research was conducted in Dzaleka refugee camp. Target population were Refugees and immigrants residing in Dzaleka refugee camp who are of school-going age (primary and secondary levels), their parents or guardians, and key stakeholders involved in education services (e.g., teachers, camp administrators, NGOs). A sampling method of which is the technique or procedure used to select a sample of individuals or units from a larger population for the purpose of conducting research. According to (Kumar, 2014), the sampling method is crucial because it directly impacts the validity and generalizability of the research findings.

The study will use the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is non probability sampling technique where researchers select participants based on specific characteristics or qualities that are relevant to the research study. This method allows the researcher to intentionally choose individuals who have particular knowledge, experiences or insights. According to (Portney, 2015) define sample size as the number of participants or observations required to adequately answer the research question. The study used require 5 refugees and immigrants, 5 parents/guardians, and 5 key informants (teachers, NGO workers, camp officials) which were included to ensure data saturation.

Research instruments are tools or techniques used by researchers to collect data systematically during a study. They help ensure that data gathering is reliable, valid, and consistent, facilitating accurate analysis and interpretation of research findings. Common types of research instruments include questionnaires, surveys, interviews, observation checklists, tests, scales, and measurement devices. The choice of instrument depends on the research objectives, the nature of the data needed, and the context of the study.

The study will use interview guide to collect data from participants, in which it is carefully prepared set of questions and topics designed to direct qualitative interviews. It serves as a roadmap that ensures the researcher covers all relevant themes while allowing flexibility for spontaneous follow-up questions based on participants' responses. The guide helps standardize data collection across different interviews, thereby enhancing comparability and depth of insights (Kallio, K., Pietilä, A.-M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M., 2016). It includes main questions, probes for elaboration, and a logical yet flexible order to facilitate rich, detailed data collection. Its primary purpose is to balance structure with openness, fostering rapport and natural dialogue, which are crucial in qualitative research (Bibby, J., 2009). Refugee camps like Dzaleka in Malawi host a diverse population of refugees and immigrants who often encounter significant barriers to accessing basic services, including education (UNHCR, 2018). While several studies have documented the plight of refugees' educational access globally, preliminary investigations are necessary in specific contexts to tailor effective interventions (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

The study will use pilot study aims to explore the initial challenges faced by refugees and immigrants in accessing education services within Dzaleka refugee camp, providing foundational data for larger-scale research.

Data analysis is simply the process of converting the gathered data to meaningful information, and different techniques need to be used (Start, 2006). After the collection of data, the analyzing of data was done using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method

for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within the data (Nowell, 2017) Thematic analysis will be employed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes within the qualitative data. This method facilitates an understanding of common challenges and diverse experiences across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Data analysis and interpretation

Response rate

The study targeted 15 participants using purposive sampling, all individuals approached agreed to participate and completed this personal interviews.

Demographic information

The demographic profile of the participants was classified into three parts which are gender, Age group and education level. The diverse demographic characteristics of the participants provided a broad range of experiences and perspectives on the factors hindering access to quality education for immigrants and refugees in Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

4.3.1 Gender of the participants (N = 15)

The study involved 15 participants, of whom 9 (60%) were female and 6 (40%) were male. The higher representation of female participants enabled the study to capture gender-specific challenges affecting access to quality education, including household responsibilities and safety concerns.

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Female	9	60
Male	6	40
Total	15	100

4.3.2. Age group (N = 15)

Most participants (66.7%) were aged between 15 and 22 years, representing the refugee students. The remaining participants consisted of parents, teachers, and education officials, whose ages and professional experience provided valuable perspectives on the educational challenges within Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

Age Group (Years)	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
15–22	10	66.7
32–48	2	13.3
Above 30(Teachers and Education Officials)	3	20.0
TOTAL	15	100

4.3.3 Education Level (N = 15)

The majority of participants were secondary school students (66.7%), while teachers and education officials possessed diploma or degree qualifications. This diversity in educational background enriched the study by providing perspectives from both learners and education professionals. Note: If your actual sample differs (for example, if some parents have no formal education or some teachers have bachelor's degrees while others have diplomas), replace the education categories and frequencies with your actual data. The structure above is the standard format expected in Chapter Four of a research report.

Education Level	Frequency(n)	Percentage (%)
Secondary School Students	10	66.7
Primary/Secondary Education(parents)	2	13.3
Diploma/Degree (Teachers and Education Officials)	3	20.0
TOTAL	15	100

FINDINGS

The research sheds light on the complex array of challenges that refugees and immigrants in Dzaleka Refugee Camp face in their attempts to access quality education. These challenges are multifaceted and often interrelated, creating a web of barriers that hinder learners from realizing their full educational potential. One of the most significant obstacles identified concerns legal and policy constraints. Many refugees lack formal recognition of their refugee status or encounter restrictive enrollment policies, which often deny or limit their access to formal education systems. Without proper documentation or legal status, refugees frequently find themselves excluded from public schools or placed in lower-quality educational programs, thereby denying them the chance to acquire essential skills and knowledge.

Financial hardships represent another critical barrier to education in the camp. Many refugee families struggle with limited income, making it difficult to afford school fees, uniforms, learning materials, or transportation costs required for their children's schooling. These economic difficulties frequently force families to make difficult choices, such as withdrawing children from school or keeping them at home to help with household chores or income-generating activities, severely disrupting their educational trajectory. Moreover, the scarcity of resources within the camp itself further exacerbates these issues. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning facilities, shortages of textbooks, and limited access to teaching aids diminish the quality of education that students receive. Such infrastructural deficiencies hinder effective teaching and learning, leaving students with insufficient opportunities to grasp key concepts or develop necessary skills.

Language barriers also pose a significant challenge. Refugees come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and often the language of instruction in local schools is unfamiliar to many students. This language gap hampers effective communication between teachers and learners, impeding comprehension and participation in class activities. As a result, students may feel disengaged or frustrated, which negatively impacts their academic performance and motivation to continue their education. These language difficulties are compounded by cultural differences that can influence classroom dynamics and the broader learning environment, potentially leading to feelings of alienation among refugee students.

Social and cultural barriers add another layer of difficulty. Discrimination, social exclusion, and stigmatization often diminish the sense of safety and belonging for refugee students within local schools and the wider community. Such social marginalization discourages participation, fosters feelings of isolation, and can lead to decreased motivation or dropout. Additionally, gender-based barriers such as cultural expectations or safety concerns may restrict girls' access to education, perpetuating gender disparities in learning opportunities.

A significant systemic challenge is the shortage of qualified teachers who are trained to address the unique needs of refugee learners. Many educators lack specialized training in trauma-informed teaching or in managing linguistic and cultural diversity. This gap limits their ability to adapt pedagogical approaches effectively, resulting in a decline in the quality of education provided. Consequently, even when refugee students gain access to schooling, they may struggle to receive the support necessary to thrive academically. The barriers faced by refugees and immigrants in Dzaleka Refugee Camp are deeply interconnected, involving legal, financial, infrastructural, linguistic, psychosocial, and societal factors. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategies and targeted interventions to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment. Only through concerted efforts can the rights of refugee children to quality education be truly realized, enabling them to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to their communities.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Authorities should review and reform education policies to eliminate legal and documentation barriers that prevent refugee and immigrant children from enrolling in school. Policies should recognize refugee documentation and ensure that all children have equitable and timely access to formal education regardless of their legal status.

Language support programs should be introduced to help learners overcome communication challenges and improve classroom participation. In addition, psychosocial support services,

including counseling and trauma-informed educational practices, should be established to address the emotional and mental health needs of refugee learners, thereby improving retention and educational outcomes.

Teachers should receive continuous professional development in multicultural education, inclusive teaching methods, and trauma-sensitive pedagogies. Recruiting qualified educators who understand the unique challenges faced by refugee and immigrant learners will further improve the quality of instruction and provide better support for students from diverse backgrounds.

Awareness campaigns should be conducted to reduce discrimination and promote acceptance of refugees within schools and host communities. Furthermore, gender-sensitive educational programs should be implemented to ensure equal access to education and learning opportunities for all children, particularly girls and other vulnerable groups.

Collaboration among government institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international agencies, and refugee community representatives should be strengthened to mobilize resources and coordinate educational interventions. Refugee communities should actively participate in planning, implementing, and evaluating educational programs to ensure that interventions are culturally relevant, sustainable, and responsive to local needs.

A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework should be established to regularly assess the effectiveness of educational interventions. Continuous feedback should be collected from students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders to identify challenges, measure progress, and inform evidence-based improvements in educational policies and programs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings at Dzaleka refugee camp, where most respondents provided positive response towards the factors hindering access to quality education by immigrants and refugees. Following the comprehensive collection and analysis of data, this study has identified and assessed the key factors impeding access to quality education among refugees and immigrants in Dzaleka Refugee Camp. The findings underscore that barriers are multifaceted, including legal and policy-related constraints such as restricted enrollment policies and lack of proper documentation, which prevent many refugees from accessing formal educational opportunities. Economic hardships remain a significant obstacle, with many families unable to afford associated costs or meet basic needs, thereby limiting children's educational participation.

Language barriers and cultural differences were found to adversely affect communication and learning engagement, while psychosocial issues stemming from displacement, trauma, and instability hinder students' ability to focus and perform academically. Social discrimination and gender-based barriers further restrict equitable access, particularly for vulnerable groups like girls and marginalized communities. The shortage of qualified educators equipped to address the specific needs of refugee learners exacerbates these challenges, impacting the overall quality of education available.

The data driven insights from this study highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions. Recommendations include policy reforms to remove enrollment barriers, increased investment in educational infrastructure and resources, language and psychosocial support programs, and capacity building for educators. Promoting inclusive policies and fostering community engagement are crucial steps toward overcoming these challenges. Only through a collaborative and sustained effort can the barriers be effectively addressed, ensuring that refugee and immigrant children in Dzaleka have access to equitable, quality education that supports their development and future prospects.

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