



**SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES AND SERVICES
AVAILABLE FOR ACADEMIC INCLUSION OF LEARNERS
WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT IN JUNIOR SECONDARY
SCHOOLS AT DADAAB REFUGEE CAMP, KENYA**

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Abstract:

Inclusive education in refugee settings remains a global challenge, especially for learners with disabilities who face multiple vulnerabilities (UNHCR 2023). This paper presents key findings from a study that explored supportive structures and services available for the academic inclusion of learners with hearing impairments in Junior Secondary Schools at Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya. Guided by the Social Inclusion Theory by Clough and Corbett, the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design within the interpretivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences. Data were collected from 9 learners with hearing impairments, 10 peers, and 10 teachers through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and then analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that although inclusive practices are recognized and somewhat applied, learners still encounter significant obstacles due to a lack of assistive technologies, a shortage of Kenyan Sign Language interpreters, and limited teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. Nonetheless, supportive services such as availability of Learner Support Assistants, Educational Assessment and Resource Centers, psychosocial support and the integration of ICT were identified as essential facilitators of inclusion. However, the sustainability of these services is threatened by donor fatigue and the gradual withdrawal of humanitarian aid. The study reaffirms the Social Inclusion Theory by illustrating that inclusion requires systemic, pedagogical and attitudinal change. Recommendations include strengthening teacher training, expanding sign language interpretation, improving digital learning tools, and maintaining partnerships between the Ministry of Education, UNHCR and humanitarian organizations to ensure inclusive education.

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1. Background

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that all learners, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have the right to access quality education within the same learning environment (United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 1991). It emphasizes equality, participation and the removal of barriers that may hinder learners from fully engaging in the learning process. In this study, inclusive education is understood as a process that ensures learners with hearing impairment learn alongside their peers without disabilities, while receiving the necessary support to participate meaningfully in academic and social activities. Hearing impairment refers to partial or total loss of hearing that affects a learner's ability to access spoken language, often requiring alternative communication approaches such as Kenyan Sign Language (KSL), visual aids, or assistive devices (WHO, 2021).

The principles of inclusive education are anchored in global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement Ainscow *et al.* (2019) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Chibaya *et al.*, 2021), which advocate for equitable access to education and the full participation of learners with disabilities. These principles highlight that inclusion is not limited to physical access but extends to social acceptance, participation and achievement. In line with the Social Inclusion Theory (Clough & Corbett, 2000), inclusion requires education systems to adapt to the needs of learners rather than expecting learners to fit into rigid systems. This involves restructuring teaching practices, providing adequate resources and fostering positive attitudes towards diversity.

Despite these principles, the implementation of inclusive education continues to face several challenges, particularly in low-resource and humanitarian settings. One of the primary issues is the gap between policy and practice, where inclusive education is widely supported in theory but inadequately implemented due to limited resources, lack of trained personnel and insufficient institutional support (Dure, 2021). According to Maizere (2022), the study noted that, for learners with hearing impairment, communication barriers remain a significant concern, especially in environments where teachers and peers have limited knowledge of sign language. In addition, the shortage of assistive devices, such as hearing aids, and the absence of sign language interpreters further restrict access to learning. These challenges are often compounded by negative attitudes, stigma, and limited awareness about disability, which can lead to exclusion and discrimination within the school and community.

Another key issue relates to the reliance on external funding in humanitarian contexts. Many inclusive education programs in refugee settings depend on support from international organizations, making them vulnerable to funding fluctuations. This raises concerns about the sustainability of support services such as learner support assistants,

psychosocial support programs, and cash-based interventions. Furthermore, socio-economic challenges faced by families, including poverty and long distances to school, can affect learners' attendance and participation, particularly for those with disabilities who may require additional support.

The study is situated within the context of Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, one of the largest refugee settlements in the world. The camp hosts a diverse population of learners, many of whom have experienced displacement, disrupted education, and exposure to trauma. Within this setting, the Kenyan Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) is being implemented, introducing new demands on teachers and learners alike. For learners with hearing impairment, adapting to this curriculum in an already resource-constrained environment presents additional challenges. While efforts have been made by the government and humanitarian organizations to promote inclusive education, including the establishment of Educational Assessment and Resource Centres (EARCs) and the provision of support services, the effectiveness and accessibility of these structures remain unclear.

Given this background, the study focuses on examining the perceptions of teachers, peers and learners with hearing impairment regarding the availability and effectiveness of supportive structures, inclusion programs, and services in selected Junior Secondary Schools in Dadaab Refugee Camp. Understanding these perceptions is important in identifying existing gaps, informing policy and practice and strengthening inclusive education in similar humanitarian contexts.

2. Literature Review

Inclusive education is widely understood as a process that seeks to address and respond to the diverse needs of all learners by promoting participation in learning and reducing exclusion within education systems. According to UNESCO (2020), inclusive education involves restructuring policies, practices and school cultures so that all learners, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, can access quality education within mainstream settings. This perspective emphasizes that inclusion goes beyond physical placement in classrooms and requires meaningful engagement, participation and achievement. Scholars further argue that inclusive education is grounded in principles of equity, social justice and human rights, where every learner is valued and supported to reach their full potential (Tonegawa, 2022; Maizere & Robert, 2024). In the case of learners with hearing impairment, inclusion requires the provision of appropriate communication strategies, assistive technologies, and adapted teaching approaches to ensure equal access to learning opportunities.

Learners with hearing impairment face unique challenges in inclusive education, particularly related to communication. Research shows that effective inclusion for these learners depends on the use of multiple communication approaches such as sign language, visual aids and assistive devices. Malado (2024), notes that inclusive practices for learners with hearing impairment include the use of hearing aids, total

communication approaches and adapted instructional methods. However, despite these strategies, many inclusive settings still struggle to meet the needs of these learners. Limited teacher proficiency in sign language, lack of specialized resources and rigid curriculum structures often hinder effective participation. As a result, learners with hearing impairment may be physically present in classrooms but remain academically and socially excluded, highlighting the gap between policy intentions and actual practice. Peer interaction is another important factor influencing inclusion. Studies indicate that learners who are deaf or hard of hearing often experience difficulties in communicating with their hearing peers due to language differences, which can lead to social isolation and reduced participation (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis [KIPPRA], 2024). Communication barriers can limit learners' ability to engage in group discussions, co-curricular activities, and social interactions, ultimately affecting their sense of belonging. However, when appropriate support systems are in place, such as peer sensitization and basic sign language training, learners with hearing impairment can actively participate and build meaningful relationships. This suggests that inclusion is not only dependent on teachers but also on peer attitudes and the overall school environment.

A wide range of barriers continues to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment. Structurally, the shortage of trained teachers, the lack of sign language interpreters, and limited access to assistive devices remain significant challenges. Maizere (2020) highlights that inadequate infrastructure and insufficient teacher preparation contribute to exclusion within inclusive settings. Instructional barriers also exist, including the use of inappropriate teaching methods and a lack of adapted learning materials such as visual resources and sign language textbooks. These limitations make it difficult for learners with hearing impairment to fully access and understand lesson content. In addition, socio-cultural factors such as negative attitudes, stigma, and lack of awareness about disability continue to affect inclusion. Edmondson and Howe (2019), found that learners with hearing impairment often face discrimination and low expectations from both teachers and peers, which negatively impacts their academic engagement and confidence.

The challenges of inclusive education are further intensified in humanitarian and refugee contexts. In such settings, education systems are often characterized by limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and unstable learning environments. Research shows that access to inclusive and quality education in refugee contexts is constrained by shortages of trained personnel, inadequate infrastructure, and reliance on donor funding. Pérez-Jorge *et al.* (2021) emphasize that learners with hearing impairment in such contexts face compounded challenges due to communication barriers and a lack of specialized support services. Furthermore, displacement and disrupted education create additional difficulties in curriculum continuity and learning progression. These conditions make it more difficult to implement inclusive education effectively, particularly for learners with disabilities who require additional support.

Institutional support structures play a critical role in promoting inclusive education. These structures include psychosocial support services, learner support assistants, assistive devices, inclusive policies, and community engagement programs. Monica, Rop and Tanui (2023) argue that the success of inclusive education depends not only on policies but also on the availability of adequate resources and supportive school environments. Support services such as counselling, resource centres, and financial assistance programs have been shown to improve learners' participation, well-being, and retention in school. Additionally, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and innovative teaching strategies can enhance learning experiences, particularly for learners with hearing impairment who benefit from visual learning approaches. However, the effectiveness of these support systems is often limited by inadequate funding, insufficient training, and weak coordination among stakeholders, especially in resource-constrained settings.

Despite the growing body of literature on inclusive education, there remains a significant gap in research focusing on institutional support structures within humanitarian contexts, particularly in refugee camps. Most existing studies have focused on general barriers and instructional strategies, with limited attention given to the perceptions of key stakeholders such as teachers, peers, and learners with hearing impairment. Furthermore, there is limited understanding of how different support systems, such as financial assistance, psychosocial services and ICT, interact to influence inclusion in resource-limited environments. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining the perceptions of stakeholders on the availability and effectiveness of supportive structures, inclusion programs and services in Junior Secondary Schools in Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya.

3. Materials and Methods

This section describes the research design, study area, participants, sampling procedures, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques used in the study.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers, peers and learners with hearing impairment regarding the availability of supportive structures, inclusion programs and services in Junior Secondary Schools. This design was appropriate because it allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences within their natural context. The qualitative approach also enabled the researcher to capture rich, detailed narratives that reflect the realities of inclusive education in a humanitarian setting.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in selected Junior Secondary Schools within Dadaab Refugee Camp, located in Garissa County, Kenya. Dadaab is one of the largest refugee camps in

the world and hosts a diverse population, mainly from Somalia and neighbouring countries. The camp is characterized by limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and reliance on humanitarian support for service provision, including education. These conditions make it a suitable context for examining inclusive education practices in emergency settings (UNHCR, 2023).

3.3 Study Population and Participants

The study involved three categories of participants: learners with hearing impairment, teachers and hearing peers. These groups were selected because they are directly involved in the implementation and experience of inclusive education.

A total of 29 participants were involved in the study. This included:

- Learners with hearing impairment: 9 participants,
- Teachers: 10 participants,
- Peers: 10 participants.

The learners with hearing impairment were within the Junior Secondary School level (typically aged between 14 and 24 years), while teachers were adults responsible for delivering instruction across different learning areas. Peers were learners without hearing impairment within the same age range as the learners with hearing impairment. Both male and female participants were included to ensure diverse perspectives.

3.4 Sampling Procedures

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who had direct experience with inclusive education. Schools were selected based on the presence of learners with hearing impairment and the implementation of inclusive education practices. Within the selected schools, teachers and learners with hearing impairment were purposively identified because of their direct involvement in teaching and learning processes in inclusive classrooms. In addition, snowball sampling was used to identify hearing peers. Initial participants, particularly learners with hearing impairment and teachers, helped to identify peers who regularly interacted with and supported learners with hearing impairment in both academic and social activities. These peers were then approached and invited to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was appropriate in this context because it enabled the researcher to reach participants who were actively engaged in inclusive practices but may not have been easily identifiable through formal school records. The combination of purposive and snowball sampling ensured that the study included information-rich participants who could provide meaningful insights into the availability and effectiveness of supportive structures, inclusion programs, and services within the school setting.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and learners with hearing impairment to explore their individual experiences

and perceptions. The interview guide included open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their views freely.

Focus group discussions were conducted with hearing peers to capture shared experiences and group perspectives on inclusion. Each FGD consisted of 10 participants and was facilitated by the researcher using a discussion guide. To support communication with learners with hearing impairment, the researcher used Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) and, where necessary, worked with trained interpreters or classroom assistants. Field notes were also taken during data collection to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information.

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities, including educational and camp administration bodies. Permission was also sought from school administrators. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained from teachers and assent from learners, with additional consent from caregivers and headteachers where necessary. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted within the school environment at times convenient to participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes, while FGDs lasted about 60–90 minutes. All sessions were audio/ video recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved familiarization with the data, coding, identification of themes, and interpretation of findings. Transcribed data were read several times to gain a clear understanding of the content. Codes were then generated and grouped into categories based on similarities and patterns (Byrne, 2022).

Themes were developed to reflect key issues related to the availability and effectiveness of supportive structures for inclusion. Direct quotes from participants were used to support the findings and provide authentic insights into their experiences. The analysis was guided by the Social Inclusion Theory (Clough & Corbett, 2000), which emphasizes participation, access and belonging.

3.8 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the quality and credibility of the findings, the study applied the criteria of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and the use of multiple data sources (interviews and FGDs). Member checking was conducted by sharing findings with some participants to confirm accuracy.

Transferability was achieved by providing a detailed description of the study context and participants. Dependability was ensured through a clear documentation of

the research process, while confirmability was strengthened by maintaining objectivity and supporting findings with direct participant quotes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Special attention was given to learners with hearing impairment to ensure that communication was clear and that they fully understood their rights as participants.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings on the availability and effectiveness of supportive structures and services for the academic inclusion of learners with hearing impairment in Junior Secondary Schools in Dadaab Refugee Camp. The results are organized thematically and discussed in relation to existing literature and the Social Inclusion Theory (Clough & Corbett, 2000), which emphasizes access, participation, and belonging.

4.1 Availability of Supportive Structures and Services

The findings indicate that several supportive structures and services are in place to promote the inclusion of learners with hearing impairment. These include psychosocial support services, learner support assistants, financial assistance programs, integration of information and communication technology (ICT), resource centers, sensitization initiatives, and school feeding programs. Together, these structures reflect ongoing efforts by schools and stakeholders to create inclusive learning environments despite the constraints of a humanitarian setting.

Psychosocial support emerged as a well-established and accessible service. Learners reported attending counselling sessions both within the school and at Educational Assessment and Resource Centres (EARCs), while teachers confirmed the presence of school counsellors who support both learners and staff. In addition, humanitarian organizations were reported to provide mental health and wellness programs, including therapy sessions and caregiver support groups. These findings suggest that psychosocial support contributes significantly to learners' emotional well-being and helps reduce stigma within the school community. This is consistent with previous studies, which emphasize the importance of mental health services in improving participation and retention, particularly in emergency contexts.

Learner support assistants were identified as a critical resource in facilitating inclusion. Participants noted that these assistants support learners with hearing impairment through note-taking, interpretation, and individualized guidance during lessons. Teachers further reported that the presence of support assistants helps to reduce workload and improve the quality of instruction. These findings align with existing literature, which highlights the role of support personnel in enhancing engagement and

bridging communication gaps in inclusive classrooms, especially in resource-limited settings.

Financial support, particularly through cash-based interventions (CBI), was also found to play a significant role in promoting access and participation. Participants reported that financial assistance supports transport, provision of school materials, and personal needs such as menstrual hygiene products. Learners indicated that this support improves attendance and boosts their confidence and dignity. These findings are consistent with studies showing that financial support mechanisms improve school attendance and participation among vulnerable learners, especially in refugee contexts where economic barriers are prevalent.

The use of ICT and innovative teaching strategies was another important finding. Teachers reported using digital tools such as tablets, projectors, and online materials to compensate for the shortage of textbooks and learning resources. Learners also noted that ICT enhances their understanding through visual content such as images and videos. However, challenges such as limited devices, inadequate power supply, and sharing of resources were reported. This reflects broader findings in the literature that while ICT has strong potential to support inclusive education, its effectiveness is often limited by infrastructural constraints in low-resource settings.

Participants also highlighted the presence of resource rooms and access to specialized services such as medical assessments, physiotherapy, and referrals through EARCs. These services contribute to addressing the diverse needs of learners with disabilities and support their participation in education. Additionally, sensitization and advocacy programs were reported to be regularly conducted, promoting awareness of disability rights and reducing stigma within the school community. The existence of inclusion clubs further supports social interaction and peer engagement, which are key elements of inclusive education.

Finally, the school feeding program was identified as an important supportive service, particularly in the refugee context. Participants noted that access to meals improves attendance, concentration, and overall engagement in learning. This finding aligns with existing research that highlights the role of school feeding programs in improving access and retention in education among vulnerable populations.

4.2 Effectiveness of Supportive Structures in Promoting Inclusion

While the availability of supportive structures is evident, their effectiveness in promoting meaningful inclusion varies. Participants reported that these structures have positively contributed to improved attendance, participation, and well-being of learners with hearing impairment. For example, psychosocial support has helped reduce stigma and improve mental health, while financial assistance has addressed key barriers related to access and retention.

Learner support assistants and ICT tools were particularly noted for enhancing classroom participation. These supports enable learners to better understand lesson content and engage in learning activities. In addition, sensitization programs and

inclusion clubs have contributed to improved peer relationships and greater acceptance of learners with hearing impairment.

However, the effectiveness of these structures is often limited by resource constraints and inconsistent implementation. While support systems exist, they are not always sufficient to meet the needs of all learners. This reflects the argument in Social Inclusion Theory that inclusion requires not only access to services but also the quality and consistency of support to ensure meaningful participation.

4.3 Challenges Limiting the Effectiveness of Supportive Structures

Despite the presence of various supportive structures, several challenges were identified that limit their effectiveness. A major challenge is the shortage of trained teachers and the absence of sign language interpreters. Participants reported that only a few teachers are proficient in Kenyan Sign Language, and in many cases, learners rely on classroom assistants or peers for interpretation. This significantly affects communication and limits learners' ability to fully engage in classroom activities. This finding is consistent with existing studies that identify a lack of trained personnel as a major barrier to inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment.

Limited access to assistive devices, particularly hearing aids, was also identified as a significant challenge. Participants reported delays in receiving these devices due to funding constraints, with some learners waiting for extended periods after assessment. While teachers attempt to make accommodations, such as seating arrangements, these measures are not sufficient to fully support learning. This aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of assistive technologies in enhancing participation and academic performance.

Inadequate teaching and learning materials further constrain inclusion. Participants reported shortages of textbooks and a lack of specialized materials such as Kenyan Sign Language resources. This affects both teaching and learning processes and limits learners' ability to access content effectively. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, which highlight the importance of adequate and adapted materials in inclusive education.

Teacher workload and burnout also emerged as a key challenge. The shortage of trained teachers results in an overload of responsibilities, reducing the time and capacity for individualized support. Administrative demands further limit instructional time. This finding is supported by literature indicating that excessive workload undermines the implementation of inclusive practices.

Additionally, socio-cultural and economic factors continue to affect inclusion. Participants reported negative attitudes towards learners with hearing impairment, as well as fears among caregivers related to loss of financial support. Economic challenges, particularly the inconsistency of financial assistance, contribute to absenteeism. These findings highlight that inclusion is influenced not only by school-based factors but also by broader community and household dynamics.

4.4 Discussion in Relation to Existing Literature and Theory

The findings of this study demonstrate that while supportive structures and services for inclusive education exist in Dadaab refugee camp, their effectiveness is shaped by both enabling and constraining factors. The presence of psychosocial support, financial assistance, ICT and support personnel reflects progress towards inclusive education. However, persistent challenges such as communication barriers, inadequate resources, and negative attitudes limit meaningful participation. These findings are consistent with existing literature, which emphasizes that inclusive education requires more than physical access to schooling. As noted by Clough and Corbett (2000), inclusion must involve active participation, access to appropriate resources, and a sense of belonging. The study shows that while efforts have been made to create inclusive environments, systemic challenges in humanitarian contexts continue to hinder the full realization of inclusion.

5. Recommendations

The study recommends strengthening teacher capacity through training in Kenyan Sign Language and inclusive practices, improving access to assistive devices and learning materials, and sustaining financial support programs such as cash-based interventions. It also highlights the need to enhance ICT use in teaching, promote inclusive school cultures through sensitization and community engagement, and strengthen the role of learner support assistants. Additionally, adopting learner-centered approaches like IEPs and differentiated instruction is essential, alongside conducting further research to improve inclusive education in humanitarian settings.

6. Conclusion

The study found that although supportive structures for inclusion exist and have improved the participation and well-being of learners with hearing impairments, their effectiveness is limited by resource gaps, a shortage of trained personnel, and socio-cultural barriers. Achieving meaningful inclusion, therefore, requires strengthening these support systems and addressing existing challenges.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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