Research



Resilience in the face of adversity: uprooted but not defeated

Reflections from a Nigerian IDP Camp

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Winner of the 2025 EDT Tim Morris Award

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Contents

About the Tim Morris Award **2**

Resilience in the face of adversity: Teaching, learning, and community resilience in a Nigerian Internally Displaced Person (IDP) Camp **3**

Executive summary **3**

Background and methodology **4**

A brief history of internal displacement in Nigeria 4

Motivation for conducting the research 5

Gaps in the research 6

Experience of the camp 7

Methodology **9**

Research design and participants 9

Collaborative analysis and knowledge co-creation 10

Research questions 10

Accessing the camp 11

Key findings **12**

From crisis to community: the birth of Gurku IDP camp **12**

Together under one sky: an interfaith, multi-cultural camp **14**

Learning against the odds: how the camp school began **17**

Exploring: pedagogical practices in the camp **18**

Montessori practices and pedagogy 18

Voices from the camp: teaching, learning, and the power of mobile devices **20**

Teachers' photos **20**

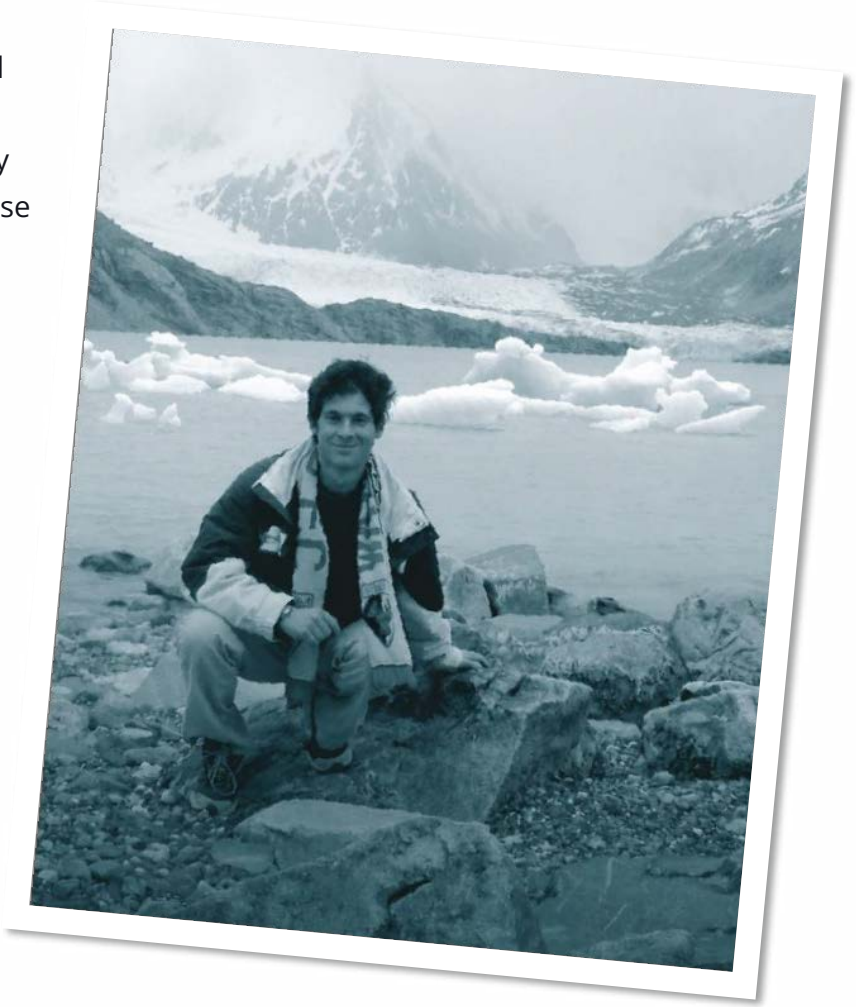
Children's photos **29**

Voices from Gurku IDP camp: a gallery exhibition of hope and resilience **31**

Conclusion **33**

References **35**

About the Tim Morris Award



The Tim Morris Award recognises outstanding contributions to educational research, evaluation, and evidence-informed practice. Established in memory of Tim Morris, a respected colleague whose work exemplified rigour, curiosity, and a commitment to improving educational outcomes, the award celebrates individuals who use evidence to advance understanding, inform decision-making, and create meaningful change.

The award honours work that demonstrates methodological excellence, practical relevance, and a clear contribution to improving education policy, practice, or learning outcomes. It seeks to recognise not only high-quality research, but also the values that Tim championed throughout his career: collaboration, integrity, intellectual generosity, and a focus on making evidence matter.

Each year, the award highlights research that has the potential to influence practice, improve programmes, and contribute to a stronger evidence base for education. Through celebrating these achievements, the award continues Tim Morris's legacy of advancing research that makes a difference.

Resilience in the face of adversity: Teaching, learning, and community resilience in a Nigerian Internally Displaced Person (IDP) Camp

Stephanie Akinwoya, 2025 Tim Morris Award winner

Executive summary

Why I undertook this research

Nigeria's displacement crisis has disrupted the education of millions of children. I travelled to Gurku Interfaith Internally Displaced Person (IDP) Camp in Nasarawa State to understand what teaching and learning looked like in this setting, how teachers adapted to limited resources, and whether mobile technology could strengthen classroom practice and professional development.

How I conducted the study

I lived in Gurku for four weeks and worked with 11 teachers and ten pupils. Using Photovoice, I invited participants to document their experiences through photographs and reflections. We then analysed the images together, ensuring that teachers and pupils helped shape the findings and identify possible solutions.

What I found

Gurku challenged my assumptions about displacement. I encountered a peaceful, interfaith community with permanent housing, shared infrastructure and a strong commitment to education. Teachers showed remarkable adaptability, creating resources from locally available materials, using mobile phones to support lessons and applying Montessori methods with young children.

Significant challenges remained, including limited resources, children's psychological trauma, disruption caused by the unfenced school, uneven parental engagement and gender bias. Yet pupils' photographs emphasised safety, play, learning, and belonging rather than displacement alone.

What needs to change

The findings highlighted the need to invest in teacher development, digital tools, learning resources, psychosocial support, and safer school infrastructure. Above all, my research demonstrated the importance of listening to teachers and pupils. Their experiences showed that displaced communities are not simply recipients of support, but active partners with the knowledge and agency to shape meaningful educational change.

Background and methodology

A brief history of internal displacement in Nigeria

"Nwoke amaghị ebe mmiri malitere iji tie ya, apụghịkwa ya ikwu ebe ọ sịrị ahụ ya."

"A person who does not know where the rain began to beat them cannot say where they dried their body." – Igbo proverb

Migration in Nigeria dates back to the colonial period. In the years following independence, the need to fill key positions in government and industry in towns and cities led to an exodus of people from rural to urban areas seeking economic opportunities. However, the late 20th century and the early 21st century saw people migrating due to religious conflict, communal crisis, and natural disasters such as flooding, as well as the activities of terrorists and armed militias.

An internally displaced person (IDP) is an exile within the borders of their country (Kaija, 2025). IDPs differ from refugees, who have crossed international borders to flee violence and persecution, whereas internally displaced persons have fled violence from their communities. Beyond designated labels are 'the lives and the personal histories of individuals who have been uprooted from their homes and have survived unimaginable human rights violations and abuses' (OHCHR 2023).

Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of internally displaced persons in Africa. According to the UNHCR 2024 report, around 3.4 million have been displaced, the majority due to the activities of the infamous Boko Haram. In more recent times, the activities of armed Fulani herdsmen – attacking farming communities and carrying out what has been described as ethnic cleansing to drive farmers off their lands for cattle grazing – has greatly increased the number of IDPs in Nigeria. For decades, religious conflicts in inter-religious communities in Nigeria also caused people to leave places deemed unsafe and return to their ancestral hometowns.

Displacement has also been caused by the corrupt behaviours of some government figures and traditional leaders. This has included employing armed militia to deliberately disrupt communities and create an artificial crisis, in order to loot the wealth of the community while its members flee for safety (Daily News, 2025; Maurice Ogbonnya, 2020; Reuter, 2026).

Climate change is another factor, and Nigeria is not exempt. Seasonal flooding in riverine communities can be devastating, forcing residents to flee temporarily to higher ground.

Motivation for conducting the research

Zama da mai-zakanko, shi kan kawo ɗanɗana.

"Staying with somebody with sugar brings a chance of tasting it." – Hausa proverb

Figure 1: A picture of a section of houses in the camp (Author's photo)



My PhD topic was informed by the crisis engulfing Nigeria since 2009: the Boko Haram insurgency. The activities of this terrorist group, whose name literally means 'Western education is forbidden', sent shockwaves across Nigeria and the world. Two attacks, in particular, remain indelible, as many inside and outside Nigeria also remember this. The first is the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Government Girls' Secondary School, Chibok, in April 2014, which gave rise to the global #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Reports documented that some of the abducted girls experienced forced marriage and other forms of abuse while held captive by Boko Haram (Amnesty International, 2024). More than twelve years after the abduction, many of the girls remain missing and unaccounted for. In April 2026, parents of the abducted schoolgirls reported that 87 of the original 276 girls had still not returned (Olaiya, 2026). The second was the gruesome attack on the Federal Government College in Buni Yadi in 2014, where 59 boys were murdered, some burned alive in their dormitories (Amnesty International, 2014).

Christian and Muslim communities alike, in civilian settlements as well as military bases, have been attacked. Since 2009, Boko Haram has destroyed over 910 schools, forcing 1,500 to shut down and killing over two hundred teachers (UNICEF, 2021). They have looted, burned, and killed entire communities, leading to a terror-driven internal migration. I always wondered about what would happen to children who were displaced and who probably had to take

refuge in IDP camps. What was it like to be displaced? Were there schools in these IDP camps? Did children there have access to educational opportunities that would enable them to better their lives and their communities, now and in the future? I have taught in underserved communities in the southern part of Nigeria for about two decades and have seen first-hand the transformative power education can have in the life of a child.

Figure 2: Addressing students on assembly in a public school (Author's photo)



Many of my former students have blossomed into changemakers, excelling in their fields and now inspiring the next generation. Education, in the words of Nelson Mandela, is 'a tool with which we can change the world.' With access to education, could displaced children acquire skills that would enable them to fit in, contribute to society, and eventually present solutions to the problems of their communities? This curiosity led me to embark on research to better understand education in these settings and to explore innovative ways to expand access to education.

Gaps in the research

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) remain significantly underrepresented in research, media narratives, and access to funding. This informed my decision to use research to amplify their voices. As I reviewed the existing literature on internal displacement, I sought to clarify the specific focus of my study and, in doing so, identified notable gaps related to teaching and learning in IDP camps in Nigeria and across Africa:

1. underrepresentation of the plight of IDPs (Schimmel, 2022 & McNamara, 2005)
2. scarcity of research that amplifies voices of the most marginalised (Baran, 2014)
3. lack of teacher involvement in designing their professional development (Burns et al, 2015)
4. absence of teacher professional development in IDP camps (Mendenhall et al, 2018)
5. remote and hybrid learning potential in IDP camps (Ossiakwan, 2012).

In particular, I was drawn to the pivotal role teachers play in displacement settings, where they are often the primary – and sometimes the sole – educational resource available to learners. While my initial intention in coming to the camp was to explore the challenges teachers and learners face under such conditions, the study evolved to focus more deliberately on teachers' adaptive and innovative responses to these challenges.

The resulting research examines the strategies teachers employ to sustain teaching and learning in resource-constrained contexts, with particular attention to the role of technology. It explores how mobile phones are currently used – and how they could be further leveraged – for teachers' professional development and for accessing learning content to support students. Central to this study was also a commitment to ensuring that teachers' and students' perspectives were not only represented but also actively shaped the research process.

Experience of the camp

GIWA BA TA DA CIZO HANNUN NAN A KE TSORO.
"Elephants do not bite; it is their trunk that people are afraid of." – Hausa proverb

I arrived in Abuja carrying deep apprehension about what lay ahead. My understanding of IDP camps had been shaped largely by media portrayals and reports from the Global South – stories of deprivation, insecurity, disease, and abandonment. I expected Gurku to confirm those narratives.

The decision to travel to and remain in the camp was not taken lightly. At the time, insecurity in northern Nigeria was widespread, and road travel was often described in fearful terms. Yet the road leading to Gurku was well maintained, bordered by farmlands heavy with groundnut, beans, and maize, and framed by hills that softened the landscape. This early contrast between expectation and reality stayed with me.

What truly unsettled my assumptions, however, was the camp itself. Entering Gurku, I was struck not by scenes of chaos or neglect, but by order, intention, and dignity. There were no makeshift tents or crumbling shelters. Instead, I found solid, block of flats housing units, solar-powered water tanks placed strategically across the camp, and an infrastructure that spoke of planning rather than emergency alone.

This stood in stark contrast to stories I had previously heard from non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers about other camps – places described as overcrowded, unsanitary, and forgotten. Gurku did not fit the single story I had come prepared to encounter. The presence of clean water, renewable energy, and permanent structures challenged the dominant narrative of what displacement must look like.

Beyond the physical infrastructure, everyday life in the camp revealed a deeper sense of safety and cohesion. Every fortnight, children and teenagers from the church marched through the camp in a joyful parade, accompanied by drums, trumpets, and clashing cymbals. Watching them, I felt an unexpected sense of peace and calm, despite the absence of fences or visible security personnel. This sense of security felt particularly striking given that some heavily fortified places, such as military bases, had nonetheless been attacked and suffered heavy casualties. Gurku, by contrast, felt quietly safe.

Walking through the classrooms and interacting with teachers and students reinforced this impression. I was struck by the teachers' strong sense of duty and the visible joy and ease with which children learned and played together. In the Montessori classroom, children aged two to five engaged in self-directed learning, working independently with puzzles, building blocks and games, while teachers provided gentle guidance. Observing these practices in a remote IDP camp challenged prevailing assumptions about educational quality in displacement settings, particularly given that many schools in major urban centres such as Lagos and Abuja lacked teachers with Montessori training.

Shortly after my arrival, the camp coordinator informed me that my planned session with teachers would need to be postponed due to a two-day wedding celebration involving the entire community. I joined the celebrations on the second day. The church was filled to capacity, and the ceremony culminated in a lively reception on the school field. During my stay, weddings took place almost every weekend, further underscoring the camp's strong sense of community and continuity of life.

I settled into the camp quickly, and over four weeks of living there, my perceptions, research process, and ultimately the outcomes of my study were profoundly reshaped. Watching teachers adapt their pedagogies despite significant challenges, and witnessing the resilience and agency of their students, compelled me to remain longer than initially planned. This report explores the outcomes of that experience, shedding light on education as it is lived and sustained within an IDP camp.

Methodology

Research design and participants

During the four weeks I lived in the camp, I worked with ten teachers and ten pupils selected through purposeful sampling. This approach involved intentionally identifying participants who were actively engaged in teaching and learning within the camp and who could provide rich, relevant insights. In addition to the ten teachers, the headteacher also participated, bringing the total number of teachers involved to eleven.

Teachers were provided with iPads, which served a triple purpose: as instructional tools for accessing learning content for students, as platforms for teachers' professional development, and as devices for capturing photographs in response to the study's research questions. Pupils were given digital cameras to document their lived experiences within the camp.

Data collection method: Photovoice

Photovoice was adopted as a central method of data collection. Photovoice is an innovative, participatory research method that enables participants to transform their lived experiences into visual data that can stimulate critical reflection and support positive change within their communities. Through photographs, participants are able to document, reflect on, and communicate their experiences in ways that may not be easily captured through text alone.

Photovoice training and ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, I conducted Photovoice training sessions with both teachers and students. These sessions introduced participants to the purpose of Photovoice, outlined basic ethical and safety guidelines, and provided practical guidance on photography techniques. I placed particular emphasis on informed consent, respectful image-making, and the ethical responsibilities involved in photographing people and spaces.

Participants were then asked to record their experiences by taking photographs in response to specific prompts. Each photograph was accompanied by a written or verbal reflection – either as a caption or short narrative – explaining the meaning of the image and the experience it represented (Mitchell, 2011; Simmonds et al., 2015). Through this process, teachers and students documented the challenges they faced as well as the solutions they perceived from their own perspectives.

Through the Photovoice process, the photographs and accompanying discussions enabled participants to document, reflect on, and communicate their experiences, creating a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the camp community (Hannes & Wang, 2020).

Collaborative analysis and knowledge co-creation

After the photo gathering was complete, participants shared and discussed their images. This was complemented by a focus group discussion with teachers, who were positioned as co-researchers. Together, we analysed the emerging themes, identified key challenges, and explored possible solutions grounded in their lived realities.

As part of this collaborative process, we also planned a public exhibition of the photos. The exhibition was designed as a space for dialogue, bringing together policymakers, political representatives, donors, camp officials, teachers, and pupils to collectively reflect on the findings and deliberate on pathways for change.

Research questions

During the Photovoice training sessions, participants were introduced to the research focus and provided with prompts aligned to the research questions. Teachers and students were asked to take three photographs over the following weeks in response to these prompts. While the children expressed excitement at having access to digital cameras, teachers also responded positively to receiving tablets, which supported both their instructional and professional learning needs.

Research questions for teachers

- What are your experiences as a teacher teaching in Gurku IDP camp?
- How have you, as teachers in the camp, adapted to cope with teaching in these contexts, and to what extent have you incorporated mobile technology in your teaching?
- Can mobile devices be leveraged to support your professional development in acquiring pedagogical skills and accessing educational content to improve students' learning?

Research questions for students

- What are your experiences as students learning in Gurku IDP camp?
- What do you feel needs to be done for you to learn better?

The following Photovoice prompts were used for students:

1. Take a picture that tells a story of what it is like to live in the camp.
2. Take a picture that tells the story of what it is like to learn in the camp.
3. Take a picture that shows what going to school means to you, or the kind of school you wish you had.

Accessing the camp

In 2024 I attended a BAICE conference at the University of Sussex, titled *Transgression and transformation: (Re)bordering education in times of conflict & crises*, to present a poster of my PhD research project centred on the lived experience of teachers and students in IDP camps, and how teachers in IDP camps in Nigeria could leverage mobile devices for their professional development.

Figure 3: At the BAICE 2024 conference presenting my poster (Author's photo)



At the BAICE Conference, while I was presenting my research, I happened to speak with an IRC (International Rescue Committee) staff member who came to view my poster. He had visited several IDP camps in Nigeria in the line of his work, and I needed access to an IDP camp for my field work activities. This is because the three camps in Abuja, which I had built a connection with through a staff member of an NGO working there, that I hoped to research, was pegged for demolition by the minister of the Federal Capital. The IRC member connected me with the camp coordinator of the Gurku Interfaith IDP camp in Nasarawa State, Northern Nigeria.

Key findings

From crisis to community: the birth of Gurku IDP camp

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, you have not spent the night with the mosquito.” – African proverb

I was keen to understand how the Gurku IDP camp came into being, particularly given that residents originated from several northern Nigerian states – Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, and Kaduna – and that some were refugees from Cameroon. The camp was initiated by a clergyman from the Brethren Church whose own community was directly affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. I did not meet the camp initiator and director until the final week of my stay, but hearing his account clarified how the camp evolved into its present interfaith form.

He recalled the moment that marked the beginning of this journey:

> “I vividly remember it was the 25th of May 2014 when I received a call from my 'junior' brother telling me that my church in the village was under attack.
>
> ‘Fifteen people were killed. We are under attack, please do not come home!’
>
> ‘People have been killed. Pray for us. If there is any support, just send us your support.’”

At the time, he had just returned from Germany and was at the airport when he received the call. In response, he immediately reached out to friends abroad to mobilise support for those who had lost family members, those who were injured, and those fleeing without shelter. As the attacks continued daily, the scale of displacement grew rapidly.

As violence intensified in areas such as Gwoza and Madagali, efforts shifted toward facilitating escape to safer locations. Transportation, food, and medication were provided to families on the move, often through volunteer networks. Eventually, many of those fleeing arrived at his home in Jos. The Gurku camp director told me:

> “Over sixty people came, but some people would stay for two to three days, then they would run to another place to look for another safer place. This place was a church house, and I lived in the church compound. But it became a big problem that my children and my family did not have space.”

The prolonged influx placed severe strain on his household. With more than 60 relatives and displaced persons sharing the space, daily life became increasingly untenable.

> "My wife could not sleep. My children could not sleep because we had to cook 24 hours. People were arriving at various times. Always. They would come at midnight. People were coming in the morning."

Recognising the unsustainability of this arrangement, he began seeking a more permanent solution that would ease the burden on his family while providing safety for those fleeing violence.

> "With such issues, I decided to say, 'OK, let me reduce this burden for my wife and my children.' So, I ran out from Jos to seek a place that could accommodate the never-ending influx of survivors."

Several communities rejected the proposal, citing security concerns and fears related to religious tensions and the possibility of harbouring Boko Haram informants. Eventually, however, the traditional rulers of Gurku agreed to receive them.

> "Until finally we approached the traditional rulers of Gurku, who agreed to accommodate us, welcomed us with open hands, and gave us land to buy to house our people and farmland for our people to farm and earn a living."

The camp began modestly in 2014 with just two families – one Muslim and one Christian – sleeping under trees in the host community. At that time, there was no water, no electricity, no schools, and residents faced the additional challenge of wild animals in the surrounding bush.

"When we first came, we slept under trees," says Joshua, a student who fled violence in Borno State. "This place was just a bush. Trees everywhere. We met a lot of animals, wild animals."

This account echoed those of the camp leader and the earliest residents, all of whom had fled Boko Haram-affected areas.

During my stay, I also spoke with the current camp coordinator, who corroborated this early history and reflected on the camp's growth. "We were hosted within the host community in Gurku before we started to build houses in the camp," he said. "We now have close to 3,000 IDPs in the camp. The population is majority Christians, with just eight Muslim families."

Reflecting on the camp's unintended expansion, the director emphasised that there had never been an initial plan to establish a permanent settlement.

> "I cannot claim credit for building the camp, because there was no plan to build a camp at all. The plan was to reduce the population of people fleeing to my home, bring people to this place because there are farming lands here for them to farm and feed themselves before the situation subsides and they can go back to their respective homes after the crisis. That was the prayer! But it did not happen that way. We were forced to buy a plot of land. And started building. It kept growing and growing."

As part of my research, students documented their lived experiences in the camp through photographs. In discussing their images with them, I was struck by how closely their accounts aligned with those of the camp's founders and leaders. One such photograph and caption, presented below, powerfully encapsulates this shared history and collective memory.

Figure 4: "When we first came, we slept under trees. In some countries, some people do not have peace like this. We live in peace in the IDP camp." A photo and caption from a young primary school girl, Hauwa.



Together under one sky: an interfaith, multi-cultural camp

A CIKIN BA*K*AR TUKUNYA, A KAN FITAR DA FARIN TUWO.

"From a black pot one takes out white porridge." Hausa proverb

Gurku IDP camp is composed of Christian and Muslim populations alongside a long-established Fulani settlement. This configuration is particularly noteworthy given that, in many northern Nigerian states, conflict between predominantly farming communities and Fulani herdsmen has been a major driver of insecurity and displacement. These conflicts are often linked to competition over land and grazing routes, with crop destruction frequently escalating into violent confrontation. In some contexts, such tensions have resulted in large-scale attacks on farming communities (BBC, 2026; Punch, 2026).

Against this broader backdrop, the coexistence observed at Gurku represents a significant departure from prevailing patterns of farmer–herder conflict. During my visit, I sought to better understand this arrangement and spoke with a teacher about the presence of the Fulani settlement within the camp. He explained that the Fulani community had been resident in the area for over thirty years, predating the establishment of the camp. Importantly, he noted that relations were peaceful and that Fulani children attended the camp schools alongside other displaced children.

The inclusion of Fulani children – who are traditionally nomadic and are often excluded from formal schooling – emerged as a key feature of the camp's approach to inclusive education. By ensuring access to schooling regardless of ethnic background or livelihood, the camp actively mitigated patterns of marginalisation commonly experienced by nomadic groups. This practice reinforced a 'no child left behind' ethos and contributed to social cohesion within the camp.

Figure 5: The Fulani Settlement (Author's photo)



Nigeria's population is approximately evenly divided between Christians and Muslims, with religious tensions—particularly in northern regions—remaining a persistent source of conflict. In this context, the peaceful cohabitation of Christian and Muslim communities within Gurku was striking. My experience in the camp contrasted sharply with the religious intolerance evident in many inter-religious settings elsewhere in the country. The physical presence of both a church and a mosque within the camp symbolised not only coexistence but also mutual recognition and shared governance.

Figure 7: A picture of the church (Author's Photo)



Figure 6: A picture of the mosque (Author's photo)



Another notable finding was the relatively high level of English proficiency among adult residents. In many rural communities across Nigeria, fluency in English is limited; however, in

Gurku, effective communication across linguistic and cultural lines appeared to support coordination, leadership, and engagement with external partners.

Taken together, these observations suggest that Gurku functions as a model of relative sustainability within a displacement setting. Housing was constructed through communal effort, supported by donor funding, while camp discipline and conflict resolution were jointly maintained by camp leadership and religious authorities. Governance structures were inclusive and participatory, drawing on both Christian and Muslim leadership.

The camp's infrastructure further reflected this sustainability-oriented approach. Facilities included a town hall, a guesthouse constructed from locally sourced clay and powered entirely by solar energy, a dispensary, widows' quarters for those affected by the Boko Haram crisis, a church, a mosque, a primary school, a Montessori section, and open spaces for children's play.

Gurku IDP camp, therefore, challenges dominant narratives of displacement. Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) TED Talk on the "dangers of a single story" warns about how a dominant single story can produce stereotypical notions of its subject. For example, a story of IDP camps as places of lack, insecurity and neglect could produce prejudiced ideas of displacement camps. Gurku presents an alternative account – one in which displacement does not preclude social cohesion, inclusive education, or sustainable community organisation.

Figure 9: The dispensary (Author's Photo)



Figure 10: The guest houses (Author's photo)



Figure 11: A view of the camp from the front of the camp guest house (Author's photo)



Learning against the odds: how the camp school began

"It is in your hands, to make a better world for all who live in it."- Nelson Mandela

"You can't stop trouble from coming, but you don't have to give it a chair to sit on." – African proverb

For many displaced children, school is a sanctuary – a place to heal and reclaim their future.

The camp school started in 2015. There were no buildings or classroom structures at the time. Children gathered under a big mango tree. A retired teacher within the camp, whom everyone calls Mama Sarah, gathered the children together to teach them. She was joined by other teachers, a few who had previously taught under the Borno State Education Authority Board, who were internally displaced, and others who had no experience but readily volunteered to teach. At that time, they were not paid. They volunteered because, before that time, they reported, you would see many children roaming idly. There was no school in the camp, and parents could not afford to send their wards to the school located in the host community.

When I interviewed a volunteer teacher who was a vice principal before the crisis in Borno, he pointed out that initially, resources were limited.

> "We found that there were 22 teachers among us, and at the time, we had more than 150 children in the camp, so we volunteered to teach the children. There was no chalk, no books, but a lot of children… they wanted to learn. There were no buildings, so we all stayed under a tree."

Over the years, with the help of donors, the camp school grew. It now has a fully-fledged primary section from primary 1 to 6, and a Montessori section that has two arms: one for younger toddlers and the other for older toddlers. The school has a population strength of 274 students, 11 full-time paid teachers, and four non-teaching staff.

Figure 12: Primary pupils on morning assembly (Author's photo)



Exploring: pedagogical practices in the camp

"Wisdom is like a baobab tree: no one individual can embrace it." – African proverb

Montessori practices and pedagogy

I was struck by the presence of a Montessori section in the camp school, rather than the more conventional nursery provision that dominates the Nigerian education system. In Nigeria, Montessori education is typically associated with a small number of elite, fee-paying schools, making its adoption in a displacement setting both unexpected and noteworthy. The Montessori approach was developed over a century ago by the Italian educator Dr Maria Montessori, whose ideas challenged the dominant educational norms of her time. She was famously dismissed from a traditional classroom for allowing children to move freely, rather

than sit silently in rows, and for recognising children's capacity to exercise agency within a carefully prepared learning environment.

Montessori's pedagogy emphasises learning at an individual pace through hands-on engagement rather than rote memorisation. Her observations led her to conclude that children learn most effectively when they are given autonomy and the freedom to direct their own learning. At the time, these ideas were widely criticised as chaotic, undisciplined, and incompatible with prevailing beliefs about classroom control. In retrospect, however, Montessori can be seen as far ahead of her contemporaries. While early educators prioritised strict regulation as a prerequisite for learning, Montessori's principles have since gained global recognition and are now widely practised.

The Montessori method is grounded in the premise that self-directed learning leads to deeper and more sustained educational outcomes than other teaching approaches. Research and sustained practice have shown that Montessori learners tend to develop strong problem-solving abilities, self-discipline, critical thinking skills, and an intrinsic motivation to learn. By entrusting children with choice and responsibility, the approach supports the development of confidence and autonomy from an early age.

Against this backdrop, it was particularly striking to observe teachers in this remote part of northern Nigeria implementing Montessori practices with confidence and ease. During my interactions with the teaching staff, I learned that the Montessori teachers had received specialist training from a representative of one of the camp's mission-based donor organisations several years earlier. The sustained application of this pedagogy within the camp highlights both the teachers' capacity for professional adaptation and the transformative potential of targeted training, even in contexts of displacement.

Voices from the camp: teaching, learning, and the power of mobile devices

Teachers and pupils had two weeks to take photos in line with the research questions. They were informed about ethics in Photovoice, including obtaining permission from anyone they wanted to photograph, amongst other ethical guidelines. Here are a few photos taken, along with their captions.

Teachers' photos

This section explores the photos taken by teachers. Each photo has captions by the teachers that distil the key message they want to convey.

In the photos below, taken by a class teacher, the boys wear sandals and stockings, while the girls wear gowns and slippers.

Figure 14: "Some parents do not care about their children's education. They prefer the boys than girls."





This picture below, taken by a teacher on a Friday morning, shows a canopy being set up for a wedding reception close to the school. The students have left their classes and are outside, distracted by the wedding preparation.

Figure 15: "The school is not fenced. Any programme within the IDP camp during school hours disturbs teaching and learning."



A teacher teaching students sounds using her mobile device.

Figure 16: "I use mobile devices to help pupils learn sounds."



It was a joy to see pupils as young as two working independently with puzzles and games to learn numbers, shapes, and colour.

Figure 17: Instructional material used in the Montessori section to count numbers, identify shapes, and differentiate between colours. (Author's photo)



Figure 18: Pupils in the Montessori section working on puzzles.



Figure 18: Word wheel created with cardboard paper by a teacher to teach pupils how to spell three-letter words.



Figure 20: Students creating objects from locally sourced materials.



Figure 21: A pupil in the Montessori section learning by self-directed learning.



Figure 22: A teacher holding a ball to be used in a physical and health education class.



Figure 23: "I use locally sourced materials from the environment to instruct my students. I leave the textbook at times to make use of instructional materials that can help them understand."



Figure 24: A phone showing how teachers make use of their phones to teach phonetics.

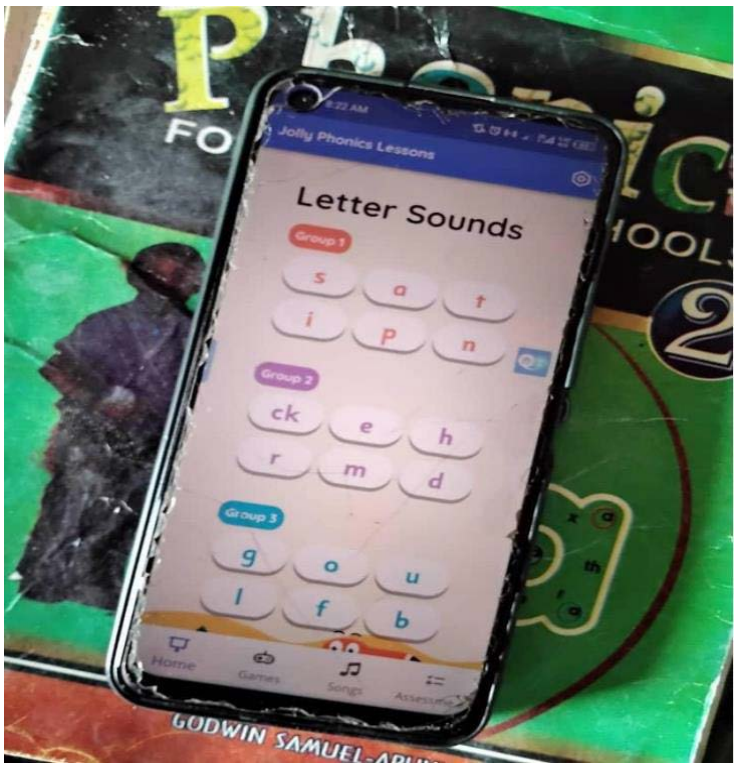


Figure25: Pupils coming to school



Figure 26: Pupil making her own word wheel.



Figure 27: Students and their teacher in a classroom.



Figure 28: A teacher teaching in a classroom.



The teachers' pictures spoke to the adaptive pedagogies they have employed despite the challenges they face in teaching in the camp. Teachers in Gurku were proactive in creating instructional resources from locally sourced materials to help pupils learn, creating innovative learning resources such as:

- the word wheel, to help pupils learn how to spell and pronounce two- to four-letter words
- objects made from cartons to connect learning to life
- using counting sticks to teach mathematics
- leveraging their phone to teach phonics from the YouTube app.

The photos also highlighted challenges they grappled with daily, such as having to deal with children suffering psychological trauma, a lack of fence that enabled students to leave when they liked, parental indifference to students' learning, and gender bias parents exhibit towards boys' education.

Children's photos

The following are pictures taken by the children. Their pictures were so positive, pointing to the sense of normalcy, peace, and security they felt living in the camp.

Figure 29: "Some other children in the country cannot have the chance to play, but in the camp, there is safety, and children play wherever they want."



Figure 30: "My church in the camp is beautiful. I like it because it is a place to worship and glorify God. It makes me remember my former church."



Figure 31: "The bell is good. Because of the bell we can know the time. We use the bell to ring for assembly and going to our class."



Voices from Gurku IDP camp: a gallery exhibition of hope and resilience

“We must tell our stories. If we do not, others will, and they will get it wrong.” – Chimamanda Adichie



On July 3rd, 2025, the community at Gurku Interfaith IDP Primary School came together for a groundbreaking event – a participatory action research gallery exhibition. The exhibition answered two key questions:

What does teaching really look like inside a displacement camp?

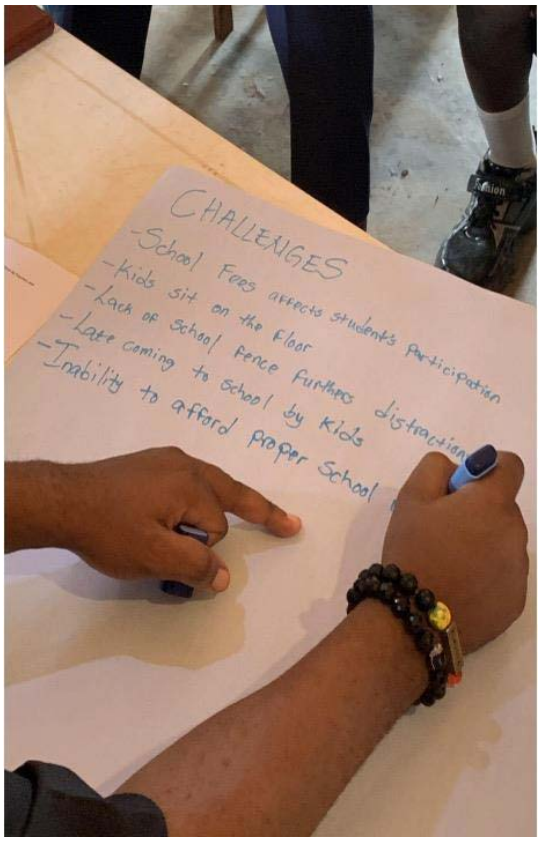
What does learning feel like in an IDP classroom?

We held the gallery exhibition at the community town hall to disseminate and advocate for change. Through the lens of Photovoice, teachers and students became researchers, using their mobile devices and cameras to document the raw, everyday realities of education in an IDP camp.

Their photos told stories of ingenuity in teaching with limited resources: teachers using tech tools to teach learners and for their professional development training; students learning and playing in the camp with joy and grit; and the challenges of displacement and the power of resilience.

Guests toured the powerful photo gallery, guided by students and teachers, followed by deep conversations during a panel discussion and a 'wall of response' where dignitaries left messages of solidarity, commitment, and action. Among the honoured guests were the Speaker of Karu Local Government, donors, and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The following photographs were all taken during the exhibition.















Conclusion

In my time at Gurku, I found a community shaped by loss, but also by cooperation, dignity, and determination. Christian and Muslim residents live alongside a long-established Fulani community, while shared leadership, inclusive schooling, and communal infrastructure have helped create a sense of safety and belonging. Education lies at the heart of this resilience. From its beginnings under a mango tree, the camp school has grown into a primary and Montessori provision serving 274 pupils. Its teachers continue to sustain learning through commitment and ingenuity, creating teaching materials from locally available resources and using mobile phones to support classroom practice. Yet resilience should not be used to overlook ongoing needs. Limited resources, psychological trauma, an unfenced school, uneven parental engagement, and gender bias continue to affect children's experiences and opportunities.

Photovoice made it possible for teachers and pupils to represent these realities in their own terms. Their photographs recorded hardship, but they also captured creativity, safety, play, learning, and hope. The collaborative analysis and public exhibition moved participants beyond the role of research subjects: they became co-researchers and advocates,

contributing their knowledge to conversations with policymakers, donors, and local organisations.

The experience of Gurku points to a clear priority. Investment should build on the knowledge and capabilities that already exist within displaced communities. Teachers need sustained professional development, appropriate digital tools and learning materials, while pupils need psychological support and a safer, better-resourced school environment. Most importantly, teachers and children must be included in shaping these responses.

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