

# Migrant integration for sustainable socio-economic and political development: insights and suggestions from immigrant adolescent learners in South Africa

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## Abstract

The African continent has witnessed an unprecedented surge in intra-African migration in the past two decades. It is commendable that research has been conducted on the role of regional immigrants in the socio-economic and political development of host and home countries. However, there is limited research on how the youth, particularly immigrant adolescents, can be integrated in learning institutions so that they acquire the proper foundation to be in a better condition to contribute to the socio-economic and political development of their host countries. This study used the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework within qualitative research methodology to capture the challenges of and recommendations from immigrant adolescent learners through the technique of Photovoice. The human capabilities approach and the acculturation theory were the underlining theoretical frameworks. The study was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical guidelines and a comprehensive set of measures was implemented to ensure trustworthiness. The evidence recommends intercultural training for educators, awareness campaigns, methodical and continuous language support, concerted effort by civil society and the government against xenophobia in addition to responsible reporting by media outlets to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes against immigrants.

**Keywords:** intra-African migration, integration, immigrants, Participatory Action Research, Photovoice

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## 1. Introduction and background

In recent decades, migration in Africa has become increasingly prevalent, driven by various factors that include economic opportunities, political instability and conflict (UNDESA, 2020). In response, it is commendable that scholarly attention has been directed towards role of regional immigrants in the socio-economic and political development of host and home countries (Gordon, 2022; UNDESA, 2020). This scholarly attention has led to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledging that migration is a powerful driver of sustainable development for both host and home countries as it brings with it significant benefits in the form of skills which strengthen the labour force, investment promotion and cultural diversity (IOM, 2023).

In the South African context, the 2017 White Paper on International Immigration reiterated the need for integrating immigrant communities. According to the White Paper, well-managed international migration is generally beneficial and should be supported by the Constitution and the National Development Plan 2030 (DHA, 2017). One of the objectives contained in the White Paper concerns the integration of international migrants and in this context it stresses that an integration policy requires the adoption of a coherent whole-of-government approach (Batisai, 2022). Such an approach brings together all the relevant segments of the government that have an impact on the welfare of immigrant adolescents in order to legitimise the human rights of immigrants and counteract negative perceptions and resistance.

It is worth noting that, among the migrant population, immigrant adolescents represent a significant demographic group with unique needs and the potential to make contributions to the socio-economic and political development of both their host and their home countries (Manzoni & Rolfe, 2019). However, there is a noticeable gap in the research and policy regarding the integration of immigrant adolescents into learning institutions in Africa. Therefore, our study is intended to provide a platform for the voices of immigrant adolescent learners to be heard through collaboration between the researcher and the participants using Participatory Action Research (PAR). In this study, therefore, the voices of immigrant adolescent learners who were actively and genuinely co-researchers inform the challenges and recommendations elicited through this study.

Numerous scholars have indicated how the integration of immigrant adolescents into learning institutions in Africa is fraught with challenges (Madziyire, 2016; Manji, 2017; Mbeve & Ngwenya, 2022). In affirming this, Gordon (2022) attests to the fact that

language barriers, cultural differences and social stigma often hinder the access of immigrants to quality education. In addition, the lack of tailored support services and inclusive policies often exacerbates the marginalisation of immigrants in educational settings (Madziyire, 2016). These challenges hinder academic performance, reducing the ability of this demographic group to contribute effectively to the development of home and host countries and also to that of the African continent at large.

In the light of the above arguments, this article proposes that the effective integration of immigrant adolescents into learning institutions is crucial to enabling them to contribute effectively to the socio-economic development of the African continent. This argument rests on the premise that education serves as a pathway to economic empowerment which enables individuals to acquire skills, knowledge and opportunities for upward mobility (Grob, 2020). In its affirmation of this premise, the OECD (2018) states that the integration of immigrants into host countries can unlock their potential to contribute meaningfully to economic growth and poverty reduction on the African continent.

Therefore, this article underscores the challenges confronting immigrant learners while also emphasising the urgent need for the challenges to be resolved and for recommendations to be implemented. By responding to these challenges, immigrant adolescents can unlock their full potential and make meaningful contributions to their communities. This in turn fosters sustainable development and inclusive growth for the African continent.

## **2. Literature review of key concepts**

In this section, the terms 'immigrant adolescent', 'integration', 'sustainable socio-economic and political development', 'Participatory Action Research' and 'Photovoice' are considered and explained in the light of the literature that has dealt with them.

### **2.1 Immigrant adolescent**

According to the IOM (2023), an immigrant from the perspective of the country of arrival is a person who moves into a country other than that of their nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes their new country of usual residence. Therefore, from the point of view of the country of departure, the person will be an emigrant; from that of the country of arrival, the person will be an immigrant (Bartlett, 2015). Adolescence is a transitional phase of growth between childhood and adulthood that falls between the ages of 10 and 19 (Smith, 2022).

The integration of immigrant adolescents is crucial to sustainable socio-economic and political development at multiple levels. First, by effectively integrating immigrant adolescents into society, nations are able to harness the diverse talents and perspectives they bring, therefore fostering innovation and economic growth (OECD, 2018). Second, by providing opportunities for education, training and employment, societies are better able to empower immigrant adolescents to become active adult contributors to the workforce and in this way enhance productivity and competitiveness on a global scale (Gordon, 2022). By pursuing this positive approach, nations can build more sustainable and inclusive societies that benefit everyone.

## 2.2 Integration

There are multiple definitions of integration, some of which are relevant to the present study. Robinson (1998:118) suggested that 'integration is a chaotic concept; a word used by many but understood differently by most'. The concept is therefore 'individualised, contested and contextual' (Robinson, 1998:118). Similarly, Adebajji (2013) considers that there is little prospect of a unifying definition. This is a sentiment echoed by Pisarevskaya, Kraler and Webb (2022), who state that integration as a concept continues to be controversial and hotly debated because it is understood differently by practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and academics. The present study defines integration as a state in which immigrant adolescent learners are eventually an accepted part of society, treated in a similar way to the non-migrant population.

This study also recognises that for integration to take pace both immigrant adolescent learners and the host community have an active role to play. For an immigrant learner, integration entails building new relationships with educators and other learners while developing a sense of acceptance by and belonging to the new environment (Smith, 2022). For the host school, integration should involve closing the social gap between the immigrant adolescent learners and native students (Bartlett, 2015). Accordingly, in the present study, integration is conceived of as a dual process of reaching out by the immigrant adolescent learners and by being welcomed by the host society.

The integration of immigrant adolescents yields benefits not only for the adolescents themselves, but also for the host country as a whole. As an illustration, the empirical report by the OECD (2018) indicates the ways in which immigrants affect key segments of the South African economy; the report's findings reveal that the impact of immigration on gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is positive. Moreover, the estimates from an econometric model used in this report show that integrated immigrant workers may raise the South African income per

capita by up to 5% (OECD, 2018). In addition, there is also evidence that immigrants have a positive net impact on the government's fiscal balance. As an illustration, in South Africa in 2011, the per-capita net fiscal contribution of immigrants ranged between 17% under the average cost scenario and 27% under the marginal cost scenario whereas that of native-born individuals was -8% in both scenarios.

### 2.3 Sustainable socio-economic and political development

Socio-economic and political development in the context of immigration encompasses a broad range of interconnected factors that influence the well-being and prosperity of both immigrants and host communities.

Socio-economic development encompasses progress and improvement in the economic and social aspects of a society (Ortynskyi et al, 2021). Socio-economic and political development in the context of immigration encompasses a range of factors that influence the integration and well-being of immigrants in a new society (Jannils, 2021). It therefore refers to progress across various dimensions, such as income, education, living conditions, gender equality, health and political stability. The OECD (2018) states that socio-economic development can best be attained by improving policies to better manage and integrate immigrants so that they can invest in and contribute to the economy in which they work and live while staying safe and leading fulfilling lives.

Political development, in contrast, involves an adjustment between old patterns of life and new demands in political respects (Jannils, 2021). Political attitudes towards immigration often reflect broader societal values, economic concerns and geopolitical considerations. Therefore, effective governance and policies on integration are essential to safeguarding human rights while responding to the needs of both immigrants and host communities. The immigrant adolescents in our study revealed that socio-economic and political development is hindered by the challenges encountered during their daily lives in South Africa. These challenges are discussed in the section that follows.

### 2.4 Participatory Action Research and Photovoice

PAR was at the core of this study. Freire (1970) created a picture of the participatory research process by saying that 'the dialogue has a horizontal relationship between the persons who are engaged in a joint search'. Fahlberg (2022) substantiates this view, defining PAR as a collaborative process in which researchers and co-researchers co-create knowledge and negotiate meanings. In this respect, PAR is a boundary-breaking methodology that seeks to dismantle the precincts

of power, culture, gender, ideology, status, elitism and class through research (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019:4). In accordance with the key tenets of PAR, therefore, emphasis was placed in the present study on the involvement and participation of immigrant adolescent learners as key players in the research project. For this reason, immigrant adolescent learners took the lead in the research project by identifying challenges to integration and making recommendations to alleviate these challenges.

### 3. Materials and methods

Our study adopted a qualitative approach by using a multiple case-study design in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of the complex nature of being an immigrant adolescent learner in South Africa. Four immigrant adolescent learners were purposively sampled from each of three schools, resulting in a total of 12 co-researchers. We considered a small sample size suitable for this study since PAR works best with small numbers when ideas need to be shared.

The choice of a methodology that empowered immigrant adolescent learners with an opportunity to express their views about integration was of paramount importance. Accordingly, Photovoice was chosen because of its participatory research format and its ability to capture a more detailed account and understanding of the experiences of immigrant adolescent learners in South Africa. According to Fahlberg (2022), Photovoice is a process in which individuals use cameras to photograph their everyday realities. Ostaszewska (2018) adds that in Photovoice the camera is used to reveal reality as seen by a photographer. This is significant because it enabled the researchers to focus on the challenges and recommendations of greatest concern to immigrant adolescent learners as revealed through their pictures.

We therefore used cameras as the primary tool for our data collection: they captured pictures that were subsequently discussed in focus group discussions (FGDs). Thus, the first level of data analysis occurred in these FGDs through the SHOWeD method, which is a set of standardised questions (Limaye, Rivas-Nieto, Carcamo & Blas, 2018). The second level of analysis was conducted through research techniques that entail participatory diagramming and a variety of diagramming methods, such as timelines, flowcharts and/or tables (Limaye et al, 2018). In the current study, participatory diagramming enabled a number of primary themes to be identified from the Photovoice presentations and also from our engagements with the co-researchers. The third level of analysis used Tesch's eight steps of thematic analysis, with which the collected data were organised into categories or topics to bring order and structure to the mass of collected data and to derive meaning from them.

Trustworthiness in our study was achieved by ensuring that the findings closely reflected the views of the immigrant adolescent learners through involving them in every step of the research process as co-researchers. Ethical considerations play an important role in PAR projects; our study therefore adhered to a variety of ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, informed consent and ensuring the confidentiality of the information with the immigrant adolescent learners. Moreover, another primary ethical consideration that applied to this study was that the co-researchers were below the age of 18 years. This required the co-researchers to exercise additional care, including obtaining ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee with the protocol number H20/11/34.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1 Challenges to integration**

The immigrant adolescent learners in our study revealed a variety of challenges that present implications for integration. This section presents the challenges, such as the inability to interact due to a language barrier, discrimination and xenophobia, that were experienced by the immigrant adolescent learners. In this article it is argued that these challenges need to be resolved in order for sustainable socio-economic and political development to be realised. They are described in the sections that follow.

#### *4.2.1 Inability to interact due to the language barrier*

It emerged from the study that one of the major challenges to integration is the inability to interact due to a language barrier. Nathan took the picture in Figure 1 and provided an explanation of this challenge to integration:



I took this picture of people distant from each other because to me it represents what I consider to be the biggest challenge for immigrants. Sometimes it is hard to interact, not because you don't want to but sometimes because you don't know the language to use for interacting. This is hard because as an immigrant you would like to fit in so that you can feel that you belong. (Nathan)

**Figure 1:** My acculturation journey

According to Smith (2022), we can gauge the extent of a person's progress towards integration by examining their ability to learn the language of communication in the host society. Similarly, in a study of four Korean children in an Australian lower primary school, Madziyire (2016:65) observed that the adjustment of children to the school environment depended mainly on 'actual and perceived' language inadequacy.

Moreover, Aliti's (2014) empirical study in Sweden reported that the lack of knowledge of the local language was the main barrier to integration. This is because language facilitates the definition of an immigrant as 'the other' (Aliti, 2014). Aliti (2014) concluded that the capacity to speak the native language is considered the most important aspect of being Swedish. In addition, findings by Isseri, Muthukrishna and Philpott (2018) suggested that the degree of proficiency in the dominant language of the host country may create either opportunities for or barriers to integration. Our study also indicates that the inability to speak the host country's language can lead to discrimination.

#### 4.2.2 *Discrimination at school*

It emerged from the present study that immigrant adolescent learners sometimes faced discrimination while at school. Some co-researchers stated that the discrimination that they faced in the school environment was one of the major impediments to their integration. Tino took a picture (Figure 2) of his school's environment in black and white to illustrate a gloomy perspective of South Africa:





This is a black-and-white picture because I did not like how I was treated at the school. I was not accepted at that time. I was new in SA. I was bullied and discriminated against. I was afraid of reporting because that meant that I will be bullied more. So it was very hard for me the first years that I was in SA, it was very difficult but at least now I can stand up for myself.

(Tino)

**Figure 2:** My first school

Tino's personal account vividly illustrates the detrimental impact of discrimination on immigrant adolescents' integration into schools. His narrative resonates with findings drawn from the existing literature which underscore the pervasive challenges faced by immigrant students in navigating unfamiliar educational environments (Isseri et al, 2018; Limaye et al, 2018; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2017). Research by Vandeyar and Vandeyar (2017) highlighted the ways in which experiences of discrimination, such as bullying and social exclusion, engender feelings of isolation and alienation among immigrant youths. These negative encounters not only impede academic engagement, but also hinder the formation of the supportive peer networks that are crucial to successful integration.

Moreover, Tino's reluctance to report instances of discrimination reflects a common phenomenon documented in studies by Reynolds and Crea (2017), where the fear of retaliation discourages immigrant students from seeking institutional support. This reluctance perpetuates a cycle of silence and exacerbates the marginalisation experienced by immigrant adolescents in school settings (Ingrid & Byskov, 2020). Tino's journey underscores the critical need for schools to deal proactively with discrimination and cultivate inclusive environments that foster the social and academic integration of immigrant adolescents.

#### 4.2.3 *Discrimination by institutions outside school*

The present study found that one of the major challenges faced by immigrant adolescent learners was discrimination when they interacted with institutions outside school. In talking about the impact of institutions, the co-researchers identified institutions that they consider to be non-receptive to immigrants, including public

hospitals, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and local sporting governing institutions. Andre took a picture of the gate of a public hospital (Figure 3) to represent public institutions, which he also described as follows:



This is a picture of a hospital gate. I have noticed that public hospitals are not welcoming to foreigners. The moment they notice that you are not South African, their attitude changes. I have witnessed this affecting my parents more; unlike me, my parents cannot speak a South African language fluently. When they respond in English, they are looked at in a certain way. It even changes the approach nurses had. (Andre)

**Figure 3:** Public institutions, a nightmare

Another co-researcher, Tino, mentioned being treated badly by the institution responsible for managing sports in his province. Tino recalled an incident as follows:

When it was my time to run with some other people, they first took my identity document and they said, 'What's this surname?' And then I called out my surname. Then they asked me again, 'Please explain us this surname,' and then I said my surname and then they put me aside. Literally, put me aside and said, 'We are going to put you in after we are able to call out your surname.' Then I waited there, another group came to run and I say, 'Sir, are you ready?' And he said, 'Wait, wait.' Other people ran. Until the event finished, I didn't run just because someone couldn't just call out my surname. (Tino)

The findings from Tino, Andre and other co-researchers confirm that interactions with institutions outside the school are a significant source of acculturative stress, which hinders integration. Similarly to the central view of critical realism, they also suggested that the impact of institutions in shaping people's well-being is essential. Similarly, Manzoni and Rolfe (2019) argued that the experiences of immigrant adolescent learners in interacting with institutions outside the school help to create an overall perception of the country as a whole, which is a vital prerequisite for integration. Adebajani et al (2014) added that the experiences of immigrant adolescent learners cannot be separated from what they experience when interacting with institutions outside

the school, because schools are not value neutral but a microcosm of society at large.

Despite the discrimination they encounter from institutions outside the school, immigrant adolescent learners also experience discrimination based on accent and complexion, as discussed in the next section.

#### 4.2.4 *Discrimination based on accent and complexion*

Some co-researchers stated that when they are in South Africa, they feel as though they do not have a voice, compared to the time when they were in their home country. The co-researchers stated that this feeling derives from the fact that they could not always speak when they wanted to because they could be mocked about their accent. The co-researchers stated that when they speak, sometimes people laugh to such an extent that they sometimes preferred to keep quiet even when they had something to say. On this point, Tino stated:

I was mocked for the way I pronounce words, the way I say things and my accent, and the way I count numbers too and everything such that I got scared to speak even if I wanted to talk to a person. (Tino)

Corroborating this experience, Nathan reported that sometimes when he needed something, people would first ask if he was South African:

When I want something, they will ask, 'Are you South African?' Well, sometimes I even think of lying and say, 'Yes, I am.' Then they will have a follow-up question: 'Then, why do you look like this and why do you speak like this?' Something is not right. (Nathan)

The way co-researchers such as Tino chose not to speak out of fear of being mocked amounts effectively to the deprivation of the human capability of senses, imagination and thought (Ingrid & Byskov, 2020). Affirming this, Titzmann et al (2015) asserted that when immigrants do not have a voice, they are deprived of a human right and are barred from occupying the same social space as citizens. This hinders their full participation in facilitating socio-economic and political development. Batisai (2022) has explained the way immigrants such as Nathan are subjected to condescending questions as being a form of dehumanisation which thwarts their efforts at integration. In addition to experiencing discrimination, the fear of xenophobia is also a significant impediment to the integration of immigrant adolescents.

#### 4.2.5 *Fear of xenophobia or afrophobia*

Some of our co-researchers mentioned xenophobia as being one of the factors that contributed to the shattering of hopes for integration into South Africa. When probed about the source of this fear of

xenophobia, most of the co-researchers stated that the fear derives from the images and videos that they have seen on social media where foreign nationals were being burnt and brutally killed. Some of the co-researchers feared that the recent looting of foreign-owned shops could culminate in xenophobic violence. One of the co-researchers, Chido, took a picture of a fire burning (Figure 4) as a representation of the fear of xenophobia:



This reminds me when I saw xenophobia in South Africa. I was in Johannesburg, and it was the worst time of my life. People were getting burned and to me it affected me because I couldn't go to school for a very long time because we were afraid. We were living in fear. So, we could hear people crying, people screaming, and I was, like, these are my fellow brothers and sisters from different mothers. This incident reminded me that we are never safe in South Africa, no matter what.

(Chido)

**Figure 4:** Xenophobia: my worst fear

The findings of the present study are consistent with those of other studies which showed that most immigrant families live in fear that arises from the intensity and violence associated with the xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals (Rugananam, 2022). This fear of xenophobic violence sometimes culminates in negative academic performance. Moreover, the experiences of the co-researchers regarding academic performance concur with those described in the literature regarding Global South contexts, such as those in China and India (Batisai, 2016; Rugunanan, 2016; Wang & Qin, 2020).

In support of this contention, Adebani (2013) argued that intense xenophobic violence creates a pessimistic outlook for most immigrant families who are attempting to assimilate, acculturate and integrate into the host country. The Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA, 2019) also expressed its concern about growing levels of xenophobia on the African continent. The MPFA argued that this type of prejudice undermines any integration efforts (Gordon, 2022). In addition, cultural confusion, which is discussed in the following section, is another challenge experienced by immigrant adolescent learners as they attempt to acculturate into South Africa.

## 5. Recommendations for integration

This section reports on the findings that were elicited through the 'D' of the SHOWeD method, which is a technique that is used to analyse Photovoice pictures. The 'D' answers the question, 'What can I/we do about the issues that have been raised?' Therefore, this section highlights the recommendations as elicited by the immigrant adolescent learners as needing to be implemented in order to facilitate integration in South Africa.

### 5.1 Train educators, students and staff

The co-researchers recommended that both employees and students should be trained to be accepting of everyone, regardless of their gender, language, cultural, racial and traditional differences. Kuda suggested that intercultural training be provided to government staff to reduce the challenges that immigrant families face in their encounters with public institutions:

I think the government should, first of all, train the staff on how to be welcoming even to immigrant learners, or any immigrant families, by showing them love and that even though they are immigrants, they will try as much as possible to help them enjoy various activities; and also concerning the educators, they should not be too strict on immigrant learners. Why? Because the language barrier is not something easy to learn. So, one step at a time. (Kuda)

The responses by the co-researchers confirm that teachers can play an instrumental role in creating favourable conditions for successful integration. Furthermore, according to the OECD (2018), successful immigrant integration is dependent on well-trained and well-supported teachers who, in their instructional approaches, consider the diversity of their student populations. Therefore, proper training can create diversity-aware teachers who are able to support multi-cultural learners.

Moreover, intercultural training is imperative because teachers frequently lack adequate knowledge about the appropriate pedagogical approaches to second-language learning (Aliti, 2014). Many teachers also lack adequate knowledge to recognise and support children in overcoming the effects of trauma that many immigrant children experience (OECD, 2018). For example, to thwart this, governments should make use of intercultural education as part of teachers' pre-service training. Such programmes should enable teachers to be trained in dealing constructively with culturally diverse classrooms and creating awareness of ethnic social discrimination.

Suárez-Orozco (2018) added that, in order to understand and teach immigrant students effectively, teachers must be familiar with

the strategies for teaching students with different mother tongues. Language-sensitive instruction ought to be included in the teacher education curriculum. In this approach, teachers learn to become aware of the language dimension of teaching and learning in their subjects and acquire sensitive teaching strategies and techniques. Aliti (2014) confirmed that language-sensitive teaching coupled with language support programmes can play a significant role in improving the welfare of immigrant adolescent learners in host countries.

## 5.2 Strategies to curb stereotypes

The co-researchers suggested that, for successful integration to take place, strategies that curb stereotypes should be implemented. Tino advanced suggestions in this regard as follows:

It looks like something that is passed on from parent to child, they think to them when they discriminate is a normal thing because of the lies on TV and Facebook that all foreigners are bad. Now, when they call you. When they say '*kwerekwere*', you don't see them holding their bodies or having a rough face, but they say it comfortably. So strategies are needed. (Tino)

The findings from this co-researcher concur with those of Aliti (2017), who stated that bad news in the media tends to increase stereotypes and prejudice, which in turn hinders integration. For example, in the South African context, the alleged link between international migration and the incidence of crime is one of the most widespread anti-immigrant narratives (Gordon, 2022). Contrary to popular belief, though, anecdotal data, based on information received from 1 141 police stations, has shown that there is no link between immigration and crime (Kollamparambil, 2019). These data go against stereotypes that have succeeded in framing black African migrants as 'bodies that destabilise the very foundation and survival of the nation' (Batisai, 2016:129). The black African migrants in this instance were theorised and perceived as being 'a new danger to society, a threat, an invader intent on usurping the hard-won materialities which the locals [had] earned with sweat and blood' (Tafira, 2011:116).

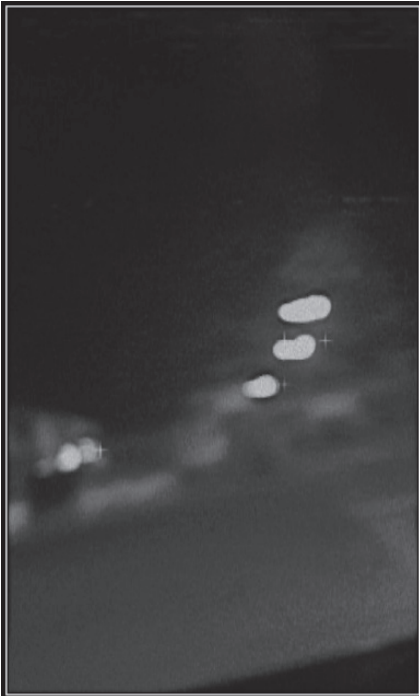
Therefore, the stereotypes and misconceptions about migrants, such as those stated above, can be corrected through the dissemination of accurate information that is intended to change public attitudes. Aliti (2017) concurs, having found that the dissemination of accurate information can play an important role in shaping migration policies, since public attitudes towards immigration and immigrants have been proven to be more important than integration policies.

In line with this, the ILO (2023) has suggested that changing the information available to people can influence their attitudes towards immigration. For example, survey-based experiments in Europe and

the United States found that accurate information about migrant populations influences people's perceptions (IOM, 2021). Evidently, a random subset of participants was given facts about the number of migrants in their respective countries. When accurate facts were presented to them, the participants in most countries were less likely to use negative stereotypes about immigrants (IOM, 2021).

### 5.3 Targeted interventions against xenophobia

The co-researchers spoke in detail about how the fear of xenophobic violence is their main challenge to integration in South Africa. Therefore, they concurred that in developing strategies for integration, it is important for the strategies to prevent xenophobia be implemented at a national level. Rudo took a blurry picture (Figure 5) to explain what the government can do regarding her experience of xenophobia.



The blurry picture invokes memories of the night my brother and I were attacked by community members on our way home. It made me feel unsafe in South Africa. It got me scared and afraid of being in South Africa because I do not know when I will be attacked again. The picture is blurry and you cannot see anything, like the way I cannot see my future in South Africa. The government should provide protection for immigrants to avoid the same incident from happening again. Apart from that, communities should be educated about the situation of immigrants.

(Rudo)

**Figure 5:** Strategies needed against xenophobia

When probed about what is it exactly that they felt the government must do, Biggaz was definite:

The government should use a dialogue and with this dialogue, make people have a sense of responsibility, communicate and look for a solution to things and a way out.

The co-researchers also stated that there must be consequences for those people who violate the rights of immigrants, because they felt that the government is not doing enough to punish people who violate the needs and rights of immigrants. In agreement with her fellow co-researchers, Henrietta added:

I feel like the government should do enough in terms of rules and consequences against people who violate the rights of immigrants, because at the end of the day, we're all humans who deserve to be happy. Because if the government did enough we would not have every year reports of foreigners being killed or their shops looted. (Henrietta)

Holding the state accountable as recommended by the co-researchers is commensurate with the tenets of critical realism that government structures represent an objective (intransitive) world which has powers and properties that shape the experiences of the people involved (Ingrid & Byskov, 2021). Moreover, the complaint by the co-researchers that the government may not be doing enough is well founded. Bartlett (2015) argued that often the cases regarding the victimisation of migrants are not taken seriously owing to the criminalisation of immigrants by referring to them as 'illegal(s)' or 'alien(s)'.

Although the co-researchers maintained that the government is not doing enough, it is important to acknowledge some of the initiatives that have been designed by the South African government to date. An example is the Roll Back Xenophobia campaign that was established in South Africa in 1998 and the National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (NAP, 2019). Evidently, such initiatives did not achieve their desired goals, as is shown by the rising levels of xenophobic sentiment (Batisai, 2022; Gordon, 2022). Therefore, as recommended by the co-researchers, the government should diversify its methods of dealing with xenophobia.

## 6. Summary of findings

The co-researchers asserted that their major impediment to integration was discrimination. They defined it as being treated unfairly based on their migration background. They also reported that, primarily, discrimination takes the form of critical comments or name-calling based on their accents and appearances. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme: discrimination in the school environment, discrimination by institutions outside the school and discrimination based on accent and complexion.

Indeed, the findings suggest that sometimes immigrant adolescent learners experience discrimination when they interact with institutions outside the school, such as the Department of Home Affairs, public hospitals and sporting institutions. For example, some of the co-



researchers stated that once workers in public institutions notice that they are foreign nationals, a change in their attitude towards them occurs. The co-researchers also reported that the negative treatment is exacerbated when one fails to speak in a local African language, for instance, isiXhosa. Another thought-provoking finding was that one of the co-researchers remembered not being allowed to participate in sports because they had a foreign surname. This barring of immigrant adolescents from participation in extra-curricular activities has negative implications for their integration because it drives home to them that they do not occupy the same social space as South African citizens.

In addition, the co-researchers reported their fear of xenophobia as being a challenge which undermines their hopes for integration into South Africa. One co-researcher reported having witnessed xenophobia, which imprinted in them a memory that has never faded away. Other co-researchers also reported that they were always living in fear that xenophobic violence would erupt at any time. One of them mentioned the fear of waking up in a burning house. Other co-researchers were afraid of running errands because they felt that they could be attacked at any time merely because of their nationality. Some of the co-researchers reported that the fear was provoked by the images and videos that they had seen on social media of other migrants being burnt and brutally killed. In addition, the co-researchers reported that, although in most instances they were not the direct victims of xenophobia, bouts of xenophobic violence severely affected their academic performance and school attendance and caused depression. Immigrant adolescent learners consequently experience secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma as a result of hearing about or witnessing xenophobic incidents.

## 7. Summary of recommendations

In accordance with the key findings on discrimination, this study concludes that immigrant adolescent learners experience discrimination from both their peers and their educators. This results in a lack of a sense of belonging and impedes their integration into South African society. Based on this conclusion, our co-researchers recommend the implementation of a culturally responsive curriculum in schools and intercultural training for prospective educators. Moreover, there must be a safe space in which immigrant adolescent learners can report discrimination and bullying without fear of victimisation.

In addition, immigrant adolescent learners sometimes experience discrimination when they interact with institutions outside the school. Some of the main institutions where they experienced

discrimination are the Department of Home Affairs, public hospitals and sporting institutions. Discrimination in these key institutions impedes integration by creating a negative overall perception about the country. In response to this finding, this study recommends that the curriculum for public service employees must include intercultural training. This will enable public service employees to learn about and know how to deal with people from diverse backgrounds and be able to respond appropriately to instances of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination.

Another key finding is that the fear of xenophobia is one of the greatest impediments to the integration of immigrant adolescent learners. Once they have witnessed acts of xenophobia, they cannot imagine a bright future in a country that is marred by it. Hearing about and witnessing incidents of xenophobia creates secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma in immigrant adolescent learners. This is grounded in the revelation by immigrant adolescent learners that while they were not direct victims of xenophobia, hearing about xenophobic violence from the media affected them greatly.

Therefore, the co-researchers recommended that South Africa should adopt a strong stance against xenophobia by enacting hate crime laws, strengthening law enforcement and prosecuting offenders. The immigrant adolescent learners also stated that the government should provide protection for immigrants. The co-researchers also suggested that there must be consequences for those people who violate the rights of immigrants; in this regard, they felt that the government is not doing sufficient to punish people who violate the needs and rights of immigrants. One of the co-researchers stated that the government should do more through the enforcement rules and consequences against people who violate the rights of immigrants.

The findings of the current study also show that immigrant adolescent learners suggested the fundamental need for strategies to curb the stereotyping of immigrants. The strategies suggested by these are: information awareness campaigns, the dissemination of accurate information by the media and a culturally responsive curriculum for teachers. It is noteworthy that the dissemination of accurate information is not within the mandate of schools. However, media institutions and regulatory bodies such as the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa, the Press Council of South Africa and the Advertising Standards Authority must be required to monitor hate speech and the instigation of hatred against immigrants. In addition, the Department of Basic Education should provide a platform for international schools that have many migrant learners on which they are able to share their knowledge on the ways to support the learning of immigrant learners.

## 8. Conclusion

This PAR research project in which the power was shared equally between the principal researcher and the immigrant adolescent learners who acted as co-researchers provided valuable insights into the obstacles encountered by this demographic group in South Africa. Through photos and direct narratives shared by immigrant adolescent learners this article has highlighted the ways in which challenges such as the language barrier, discrimination and xenophobia or afrophobia have implications for their integration into communities. To respond to these challenges, the co-researchers suggested several recommendations aimed at fostering better integration within communities in South Africa. The recommendations include intercultural training for educators, awareness campaigns, methodical and continuous language support, concerted efforts by civil society and the government against xenophobia in addition to responsible reporting by media outlets to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes against immigrants. This article contends that the effective integration of immigrant adolescents into learning institutions is vital to enabling them to contribute effectively to the socio-economic and political development of the African continent. This argument rests on the premise that education serves as a pathway to economic empowerment, providing individuals with skills, knowledge and opportunities for upward mobility. Furthermore, integrating immigrants into host countries can unlock their potential to make meaningful contributions to economic growth and poverty reduction across the continent.

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