Resilience among refugees: A case of Zimbabwean refugee children in South Africa

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Refugee learners face traumatising post-migration experiences in South Africa. Their resilience is tested in all spheres – communities which they settle, schools they go to and places they try to get social services. The purpose of this study is to explore post-migration experiences which gave rise to resilience among Zimbabwean refugee children at a refugee school in South Africa. The study was done using a qualitative case study of a school of refugees in South Africa. Twelve refugee children and a school principal were purposively selected to participate in interviews and group discussions. School documents such as enrolment records and examination results were reviewed. It was found that refugee children’s experiences require them to be more resilient in order to succeed in a foreign country. A significant contribution that comes out of this study is a resilient identity framework for refugee learners which was developed based on the findings.

Keywords: post-migration; resilience; refugee children; experiences

INTRODUCTION

When refugee children flee from their home countries because of war or persecution, they are faced with a great challenge of adapting to life in a new cultural setting. They are expected to quickly adjust and strive to obtain their goals in a new country. More often than not, children are affected mainly because of the forced nature of their departure and traumatic experiences which they encounter on the flight to the host country (Meda, 2014). Making matters worse, refugee children have to adjust and deal with a new culture of the host nation. This brings about post-migration experiences which every refugee child has to deal with.

Post-migration experiences are encounters faced by refugees when they settle in communities and adapt to the new culture of the society. Bhugra et al (2011) contend that post-migration is viewed as the incorporation of the immigrant within the social and cultural framework of the new society. Some cultures where refugee children find themselves living are very hostile. They pose a serious threat to refugee children. In some instances, refugee children end up getting traumatised in the host country far more than they were in their home countries (Papadopolous, 2007). This calls for children to be resilient in order to attain their goals against all odds.

Resilience means different things to different people in different contexts. The absence of a universally accepted definition of resilience makes scholars define the term in different ways. According to Masten (2001: 228) resilience refers to: “a class of phenomena characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development”. For the purpose of this study, resilience is taken to mean the ability of refugee children to recuperate from trauma, cope with high levels of stress and manage despite continuous adversity (Bottrell, 2009; Masten, 1994). Resilience occurs when individuals triumph against all odds. Meda (2016) states that resilience among refugee children occurs when they are traumatised, but, become triumphant regardless of adversities that they go through.

Refugee children encounter traumatic experiences which tests their resilience. Anderson (2004) argues that resilience is a cornerstone to all forced migrants. In South Africa, refugee children’s post-migration experiences require them to be resilient in order to attain their goals (Meda, Sookrajh & Maharaj, 2012). Children are exposed to some hostile communities which are determined to get rid of foreigners on xenophobic grounds (Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa [CoRMSA], 2011). Refugee children are despised in South Africa and they are denied rights to basic needs. This is in spite of the fact that the country is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees. Rwandarugali (2011) argues that while South Africa has a history of successfully integrating refugees from Mozambique during the apartheid regime, the integration of refugees today in this post-apartheid era is critical. Most refugees who come to South Africa are traumatised by events of that country. They are denied access to education and healthcare (Rugunanan & Smit, 2011)

Baalen (2012) postulates that one of the critical problems facing refugee children in South Africa is the refusal to attain health care services. Refugee children and other foreigners are discriminated and hated
for choosing South Africa as their destination. A situation of discrimination of refugees is not only peculiar to South Africa. Farmer and Birkeland (2011) affirm that discrimination in hospitals, in the community and local schools in Georgia remains a problem for some refugees. Children are discriminated against and denied basic rights mainly because they are foreigners who are not conversant with local languages.

Being faced with a situation of hostile community members, and a view that some refugee children will be unaccompanied, they are challenged with a need of being resilient and focused. Syrians have long been exposed to intensive conflict and war which have precipitated the greatest humanitarian crisis (Humanitarian Plan, 2016). They (Syrians) are still moving on because of resilience. Resilience among refugee children is enhanced by education, social support, acculturation strategies and hope for the future (Sleijpen, Boeije, Kleber & Mooren, 2016). The purpose of this study is to explore post-migration experiences which gave rise to resilience among Zimbabwean refugee children at a refugee school in South Africa.

CONTEXT OF A REFUGEE SCHOOL IN SOUTH AFRICA
The facility was historically used as a school for black working-class labourers’ children during the apartheid era in South Africa. It was shut down in 1958 during the apartheid era because it was serving black people in a white designated area. The school was re-opened by a Bishop in 2008 as a refugee institution after considering the sympathetic situation of Zimbabweans in South Africa (Principal’s speech, 2009). Upon re-opening in July 2008, there were only 17 refugee learners. By the end of 2008, the school had a total of 127 children. The number blossomed to 560 learners in January 2009. The school currently has a total of 261 learners who are in both primary and secondary education. Learners come from 12 different African countries. There are both accompanied and unaccompanied children. Pausigere (2010) argues that the school was initially opened to cater for unaccompanied learners but this thrust has changed over time as it also admits accompanied children.

Children are registered at the school with or without documents. The pioneer’s vision is to “see less privileged people uplifted, empowered, healed and reconstructed in their own lives from disasters such as violence, war and poverty” (Elias Fund n.d). The school aims to rebuild hopes of children whose educational careers were shattered because of economic and political unrest in their countries. It is in this light that teachers at the school go beyond ordinary teaching duties by providing psychosocial support and parental care to all the children (Elias Fund n.d). The school uses a Cambridge curriculum. Learners write Cambridge examinations at the end of each year. The Cambridge curriculum was chosen by the school because it is international and it enables children to go back to their home countries and integrate into tertiary education or the job market without problems.

METHODOLOGY
The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach and its paradigmatic position was interpretive. It was conducted in the form of a case study of a refugee school situated in Johannesburg. The chosen research approach, paradigm and design enabled the researcher to interact extensively with all participants in order to gain insight into refugee learners’ experiences. The methodologies used in this study were suitable since the research was about a sensitive topic and dealing with vulnerable children. According to Liamputtong (2007) qualitative and interpretive methods are especially appropriate to the study of vulnerable people because they allow the researched to express their feelings and experiences in their own words.

Twelve refugee children aged between 15 and 18 were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A school principal was also selected to participate in an interview because he had comprehensive information about history of the school and its current situation. Data was also collected by reviewing documents such as enrolment records and examination result sheets. The age range of 15-18 years was chosen because learners were sufficiently matured to participate in interviews and discussions. Both interviews and group discussions were preferred because they enabled participants to provide rich textual data. Creswell (2012) states that using both interviews and group discussions enables researchers to gather a lot of textual data suitable for a qualitative research. Data was analysed using content analysis. Validity and trustworthiness were enhanced by showing participants how their voices were represented.
Ethical issues were observed by obtaining ethical clearance from the school authorities and telling learners the purpose of the study. Pseudonyms were used. Learners’ participation was voluntary and they had freedom to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Each participant signed a consent form prior to commencement of interviews and discussions. A trained counsellor was requested to be on the standby throughout the entire data collection period at the school. Some children faced traumatic experiences both in Zimbabwe and in South Africa. This is why I decided to involve a trained counsellor to help children who could have been re-traumatised by retelling their stories. Fortunately, neither re-traumatisation nor any negative experience occurred throughout interviews and group discussion sessions.

FINDINGS

All learners who participated in this study reiterated that they faced hostile post-migration experiences from communities in which they settled. Learners were discriminated against and denied access to health care. A learner in FGD2 said,

I went to a hospital where there were donors offering free optical services and providing eye glasses to needy people in our community. My eyes were painful and I wanted an optician’s help. When nurses at the hospital learnt that I am non-South African, they stopped me from meeting an optician and they said they did not have the type of glasses suitable for my eyesight problem.

Another learner from FGD1 said,

I went to the hospital nearby to get treatment of Malaria which I was suffering from, nurses did not help me, but, teased me because of my foreign status. They accused me of wanting to finish medication which the South African government stocked for its citizens.

Learners experienced great ostracism in communities that they lived. One learner said, “we are isolated by community members. Community members claim that we are responsible for bringing dangerous diseases like HIV and AIDS and perpetrating crime in South Africa.” As a result of these accusations, refugee children are unwanted and community members do not want their children to associate with refugees. A learner said,

We used to play with other local children, but, elders in our community had a meeting where they agreed that their children should not be seen hanging out with us (refugees) because we were spoiling and misleading them. So, we hardly mix and mingle with our local friends because of that division which was created by elders in the community.

Elders in the community try every trick to get rid of refugee children. They make false accusations and blame refugee children for all ills which are done in the community. A learner said,

Some South African youths come to throw stones at the place that we stay. They break windows with those stones in the evening. Nothing is done about that except blaming us refugees for vandalising property. Some youths come to the surrounding area of our community centre. They drink alcohol, litter the whole place, have sex and throw used condoms everywhere, but, community elders say it is those refugee children who stay at the community centre.

Refugee children do not just face disturbing post-migration experiences in communities only, but, also at school. Chitate Street School of Refugees (pseudonym) is currently faced with a shortage of funding. The school’s funding problems in turn affect refugee learners. The principal said:

The school has a problem of funding. It relies heavily on donations to operate and not on learners’ school fees. Very little funds come from school fees since the majority of children are unaccompanied and they do not pay fees. Accompanied children come from poor families which include blind communities and child-headed households with very little income. Sometimes they do not even afford to pay fees.

There is an acute shortage of key teaching and learning resources such as textbooks at Chitate Street School of Refugees. The school does not have all the recommended textbooks and their library is full of obsolete material which came from some government schools when they got new batches from the Department of Education. One learner from a FGD1 said: “We do not have proper Cambridge textbooks to help us prepare for the Cambridge examinations that we sit for”. Another learner said, “We do not have Cambridge textbooks. We are 44 in my class, but there is only one textbook”. Similarly, a learner from FGD2 said,

We do not have adequate textbooks here. Most textbooks that we have are no longer being used. We get them as donations from nearby government schools which just dispose old and tattered books to us. We do not have access to internet which is very helpful especially where there is a shortage of books.
The school operates on a tight shoe string budget. There is shortage of desks and chairs in classrooms and in the library. The school does not have laboratories. A learner said: “We do our experiments theoretically because we do not have a laboratory and apparatus needed. We are encouraged to read experiments from notes that we get from teachers”. The school heavily relies on donations in order to operate. If there are no funds donated to the school, it means unaccompanied children will not have food, teachers will not have salaries and there will be no money to pay for children’s Cambridge examinations fees. Unless a donor pays examination fees for children, they will not write that year. The principal said:

We rely on donor support to run this school. If there are no donors, that will subsequently mean no salaries for teachers, no food and examination fees for unaccompanied children. Some children’s parents died of HIV and AIDS and they are raised by their grandparents and uncles who are pensioners. Such children face difficulties paying their fees.

In addition to a shortage of critical resources, the secondary school sector is facing risk of closure by the Department of Education. Despite the good results which have been obtained in the Cambridge examinations, the Chitate Secondary School of refugees has not been registered by the Department of Education. Only the primary school is registered. The secondary school has not been registered because the Department of Education claims that it does not meet the minimum requirements such as having science laboratories, sufficient textbooks and the recommended teacher-pupil ratio. The principal and Bishop’s efforts to have the school registered have been fruitless. The principal said:

The government is working against us and all our future plans. They want to close the school. The secondary school has not been registered since 2009 despite countless efforts we made to register it. They want the school to be closed regardless of good results that it is producing. That is traumatizing children at this school.

The Department of Education is reluctant to register the secondary school and this is making learners uncertain about whether they will be able to complete their studies before they are disrupted. One learner said:

We are stressed here, we are not sure whether we will finish our studies at this school because the Department of Education can just come at any time to disrupt classes or move us to a different place. Our future is very uncertain. Only the primary school is accredited by the Department of Education not the secondary.

Despite critical challenges of accessibility, sustainability, acute shortage of textbooks, furniture and funding, the pass rate at Chitate Street School remains high in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Learners are resilient and performing extremely well against all odds. In spite of the fact that learners do not have adequate key teaching and learning resources such as textbooks, they do not get all three meals per day, and they are harassed at the community centre where they live, they are resilient and determined to achieving good grades in their examinations. Despite many challenges which the school is facing, Chitate Street School records showed the following four achievements:

i) High pass rate in Cambridge international examinations. Table 1 shows the Cambridge examination results of learners at Chitate Street School of Refugees since its inception.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of examination</th>
<th>No. of ordinary level candidates</th>
<th>Pass rate</th>
<th>No. of advanced level candidates</th>
<th>Pass rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Chitate Street School Records

The school recorded 100% pass rate in the advanced level from 2011 to 2015. There has been a fluctuation of learners’ ordinary level results since inception of the school. The lowest Ordinary level pass mark of 67% was recorded in 2009 and the highest pass mark of 98% was recorded in 2013. The school had a pass rate of 97% in 2012 and 2015.
ii) The school won first prize in the Inner City drama competitions in 2009 and second prize in 2010. The competitions were for good public speaking and acting among high school learners.

iii) The school won first prizes in debate competitions at Constitution Hill and in the anti-xenophobia campaign competitions in 2010 and 2011 respectively. Children were given awards for making outstanding presentations and sound arguments about the given topics.

iv) The school helped children who did not have proper documentation to get places in government schools. The school has also managed to rehabilitate traumatised learners as well as street children to become reasonable and prospective university students.

All this has been achieved by the school against all odds. Children had to be resilient and remain focused to achieving their educational goal.

DISCUSSION

Refugee education is a general problem that is currently affecting many children in different African countries (UNHCR, 2011). Bacakova and Closs (2013) contend that education of refugee children is not taken seriously in the republic of Czech. The situation is worse in South Africa where some school management teams deny children’s right to education because they think it is illegal to have a refugee in their institutions. Refugee children from Burundi and Democratic Republic of Congo were out-rightly rejected by principals from enrolling into South African schools (Rugunana & Smit, 2011). Principals thought that it was illegal to admit refugees in their institutions (Meda et al, 2012).

Failure of a host country to support refugee education by registering their school and providing basic resources such as textbooks is tantamount to depriving refugee children access to schooling. This is in violation of children’s right to quality education as stipulated in the Refugees Act (1998) and South African Constitution (1996).

It is believed that children recover and adapt faster when they have adults to help them overcome their harsh experiences (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990). The same cannot be said with refugee children as the majority in South Africa are unaccompanied. They do not have families to console them in order to overcome their traumatic experiences. Community and society can help a child adapt to a new environment and then overcome previous traumatic encounters (Daud, Klinteberg & Rydelius, 2008).

Unfortunately, refugee children’s experiences are exacerbated by communities which are very hostile and society which generally dislikes foreign nationals.

Notwithstanding miseries in refugee learners’ lives, they are perseverant. They flourish and consistently achieve greater positive outcomes against all odds. They are motivated to study hard and withstand all barriers in life so that they can become better people. Resilience and optimism are key features that sum up refugee learners and their experiences. They are resilient and hopeful in spite of forces that work against them. According to Masten (1994) resilience emerges when a person successfully adapts to the environment despite risk and hardship.

CONCLUSION

The Zimbabwean refugee children ended up not knowing who they really were because of agony and adversities that they went through in their lives. They were very uncertain about their lives. The only certainty was the state of being uncertain about the future. Despite all the adversities, Zimbabwean refugee learners prospered. Their experiences gave rise to the formation of a resilience framework which is presented on Figure 1. This framework was expanded from Terte, Becker and Stephens’ (2009) model of resilience which comprised of the following parts: cognitions, emotions, behaviours, physical activities and environment. The model was borrowed and expanded to explain the resilient nature of refugee children who go through trauma which gives rise to emergent, divergent and unsolidified identities.

The three stages of refugee experiences (pre-, trans- and post-migration) consist of a set of challenges which give rise to four fundamental components of adversities in the life of a refugee child: school experiences, emotional trauma, behavioural change and development, and physicality. Despite harsh experiences that refugee children encounter, they are also faced with the need to fit into the school setting of the host country. Schools are often regarded as most effective institutions that can heal children of their losses and worries (Pacheco, 2011). However, in the lives of refugee learners, schools often exacerbate the complex situation of displaced children and deteriorate their settlement into a new country.
Sarr and Mosselson (2010) argued that although schools are capable of offering comfort and solace to refugee children, they can make refugee learners’ situation move from bad to worse when there is no support. Such school experiences coupled with migration encounters cause refugee children to develop emotional trauma. According to Rutter (2003) refugee children are prone to develop emotional trauma caused by complex migration and school experiences that they go through. Similarly, Amstadter and Vernon (2008) contend that refugee children develop emotional responses to traumatic incidents that they come across in their lives.

Migration experiences encountered by refugee children made them develop new behaviours informed by norms and values of the new society that they were living in. Refugee children experienced xenophobic attacks and discrimination in communities which forced them to change their behaviours and cultures in order to hide their true identities. Experiences that refugee children faced affected their physicality so much that they felt that life was better in their home countries.

LIST OF REFERENCES


Principal’s Speech 2009. Principal’s speech on the 1st Anniversary of Chitate Street School of Refugees (July 25, 2009). Chitate School of Refugees.


