

# **Educational factors that contribute to empowering Zimbabwean refugee children's social and cognitive well-being**

## **Master thesis**

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## **Abstract**

A lot is written about the education and well-being of refugee children, but most articles do not pay attention to the opinion of refugee children themselves. Furthermore, literature often does not pay attention to the environment in which the refugee child lives and the people that are involved in this environment, such as refugee schools, their parents, their teachers and the principal of the school. In this article I will investigate the factors in education that contribute to empowering children of Zimbabwean refugees in their social and cognitive well-being. The research took place in Johannesburg, South Africa. Qualitative research has been conducted, consisting of content analysis of interviews. For the analysis an existing theory on social and cognitive well-being is used (Pollard & Lee, 2003). The results show that the educational factors that are contributing to empowering the Zimbabwean refugee children's social and cognitive well-being are the teachers, learning (English language), meaningful activities

during the day, getting basic necessities, being with refugees of the same cultural background and other cultural backgrounds.

*Keywords:* education, Zimbabwean refugee children, empowerment, social and cognitive well-being

## **Introduction**

Refugees in general differ a lot from each other. They may come from different countries and have different cultural backgrounds. Reasons for leaving their country of origin also could differ. To keep the study specific, I focus on children of Zimbabwean refugees, since they are the largest group of migrants in South-Africa (Landau, 2006). Since 1970, when the civil war began in Zimbabwe, there has been increasing attention for the issue of Zimbabweans attempting to leave their country for other countries, particularly South Africa (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). The civil war in Zimbabwe was created by black Africans, who disagreed with the white minority regime in Zimbabwe. At April 18<sup>th</sup> of 1980, Zimbabwe was declared independent and raised the British regime (Howard-Hassmann, 2010). Robert Mugabe became prime minister, but under his leadership the country struggled with a collapsed economy, lack of jobs, hyper-inflation, human rights violations and persecution of members of the political opposition (Bloch, 2010). Children's education was also adversely affected as parents could not afford school fees (Howard-Hassmann, 2010). As a result, adults, families and unaccompanied children are going abroad to ensure basic survival, escape brutal attacks or meet aspirations for education (Bloch, 2010). It has been estimated that 3.4 million Zimbabweans, which represent a quarter of the country's population, have left Zimbabwe, making this country one of the largest contributors of immigrants in South Africa (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013).

### **South African context**

The South African Constitution section 29 of the Bill of Rights and the South African Schools Act No. 84 both of 1996 as well as the Refugee Act No. 30 of 1998, guarantees the right to basic education of refugees and prohibit any kind of discrimination or exclusion, whether on basis of nationality, documentation status or ability to pay (CERT, 2012; Prinsloo, 2005). However, the violation of the right to education of refugees is pervasive. Zimbabwean refugee children are regularly denied access to the South African education system, because of the

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determination of status as 'illegal', not having official documents or the parents of these children can not pay school fees (CERT, 2012; Hlatshwayo, & Vally, 2014). Legislation and policies are also frequently flouted and violated by state officials. The implementation of government policy posed a major obstacle (CERT, 2012). Furthermore, education for refugee children is also counteracted by a complex web of social, economic, cultural and poverty-related difficulties faced by refugee children. Key issues are related to the cost of education, admission and registration, age norms, lack of documentation, language issues and their arrival in the country at times that fall outside the calendar of the South African school year (Meda, Sookrajh, & Maharaj, 2012; Motha, & Ramadiro, 2005; Perumal, 2013). Yet, tentative research shows that 30% of refugee and asylum-seekers households in the area of Johannesburg were not sending their children to school and the vast majority were not aware of their education rights (CERT, 2012).

To fit the gap for refugee children who are not able to get access to mainstream education, special private refugee schools are developed to provide these children access to education. The refugee schools are temporary schools that help de-schooled and marginalized children to make the transition to mainstream schooling, to adjust academically and to the local school culture (Anonymous source, n.d.).<sup>1</sup>

The need for services by Zimbabwean migrants continue to outstrip the capacity of either government or NGO's to respond and as a result the abuse or denial of fundamental rights is prevalent (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2010). The Department of Social Development is usually the first line of services for refugee children. However, shelters funded by the Department are unwilling to take in refugee children, giving priority to local children (CERT, 2012). The services provided for migrant children, such as Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the Johannesburg Refugee Network (JRN), are around meeting basic human needs (Motha, 2005). For example, providing shelter and accommodation through safe spaces or transit camps, assisting with distributing food or toiletries, providing crèches and afterschool care, assisting in getting access to schools by providing uniforms or school fees and providing information or referral to various agencies and services. However, many organizations lack sustained funding to allow them to intervene strategically and rather respond to key issues as they emerge for children or families (CERT, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Due to privacy reasons, the websites of the two refugee schools are referred to as anonymous source. The original source can be obtained by approval of the first author.

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It is not possible to identify exactly the number of Zimbabwean refugees in Johannesburg, but estimates for 2010 vary between 600.000 to 650.000 Zimbabwean refugees in Johannesburg (Solidarity Peace Trust, 2010). The refugees put an enormous strain on the resources of neighboring countries, causing xenophobia and violence against Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa (Howard-Hassmann, 2010). Especially in the summer of 2008 violent xenophobic attacks took place. Violence extends from civil society through to the police, with undocumented migrants subjected to extortion and victimization by the police. However, South Africa is still attractive as a migration destination, because of its economic dominance in the region (Bloch, 2010).

### **Definition and disadvantageous characteristics of a refugee**

For research on refugee children, it is important to define the concept of a refugee. According to the 1951 Convention of the United Nations and the 1967 Protocol on the Status of Refugees, a refugee is defined as “a person who owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reason of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling, to avail himself of the protection of that country” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1967). The term refugee refers to life experiences and living conditions both in the country of origin and in the host country. Adapting to and responding to a new and strange environment happens rarely without problems (Catak, & Van Dijk, 2014). It is important to differentiate between someone who is migrating to another country voluntarily and someone who fled to another country involuntarily. For example, there is evidence suggesting that refugees and their children who fled their country of origin involuntarily may be at excessive risk for psychiatric morbidity, especially post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety disorders (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013).

Particularly for refugees there are unique and predominantly disadvantageous characteristics including: 1) a stressful pre-migration experience in their countries of origin, which may strongly affect their subsequent adjustment; 2) a decision to migrate that is perceived as being involuntary and largely motivated by “push” rather than “pull” factors, which increases their risk of psychological and social adjustment problems; 3) a lack of preparation for the cross-cultural transition including the lack of financial and tangible resources such as food, clothing and shelter but also proficient language skills; and 4) a

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cultural background differing from that of the targeted country (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). These four disadvantageous characteristics are all assumed to be contributing to a level of well-being which is lower for Zimbabwean refugee children than for children of non-refugees.

### **Child well-being**

In the following four paragraphs, child well-being will be discussed. It starts with explaining the meaning of child well-being. Then, the social and cognitive domain of well-being will be discussed. Finally, the rights of children regarding well-being will be explained in greater depth.

**Meaning of child well-being.** Well-being for children is defined as a multidimensional construct incorporating mental/psychological, physical, and social dimensions (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Well-being is important for children, because it influences their quality of life and this enhances the vitality of society. However, well-being should not be seen as something that is obtained naturally. Refugees and refugee children are for instance at high risk for having or developing a negative well-being, because of their turbulent past and structural problems (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). It is important to stimulate the well-being of refugee children, because ignoring it can easily lead to negative consequences for an individual refugee child as well as for society. For example, it could make children more involved in criminal activities (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). Research has shown that education can play a crucial role in reducing negative well-being and influencing well-being positively, especially the social and cognitive well-being of refugee children (Fazel, & Stein, 2002). Therefore, this study focuses on the social and cognitive domain of well-being. Indicators in the social domain are family relations, parent-child relations, participation in cultural activities, quality of life, relationships at home, relationships with peers, social acceptance, socioeconomic status, peer problems, poverty and troubled home relationships. In the cognitive domain indicators are academic achievement, cognitive ability, school function and school-related behaviors, concentration, developmental delay and school behavior problems (Pollard & Lee, 2003).

**Social domain.** Many social problems of refugee children occur in the initial stage of resettlement related to basic needs such as accommodation and education. Children of refugees are largely dependent on their parents for their social well-being, because parents

decide about the accommodation and education of their children (Clinton-Davis, & Fassil, 1992). At a later stage, these children have to look for a new social network and identity as a South African citizen. They have to learn the language that is spoken in class, get used to new food and unfamiliar cultural and social traditions. The combined effort of coping with this social process puts a considerable pressure on refugee children which might be reflected in their well-being (Clinton-Davis, & Fassil, 1992).

**Cognitive domain.** Problems in school and cognitive performance among children of refugees are customary. These problems are largely explained by the process of integration into the host culture. For example these children lack proficient language skills and have a differing cultural background (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). A small number also appears to have specific learning or scholastic difficulties. Difficulties mostly present in the educational environment among refugee children are inattention and over-activity, because of a lack of nutrition and having structural problems. Despite the difficulties refugee children face, parents of refugee children value education highly and are very keen for their children to progress academically, which could stimulate the children's cognitive well-being (O'Shea, Hodes, Down, & Bramley, 2000).

**Rights of children for well-being.** The well-being of children is protected by rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has been ratified in South Africa at June 16<sup>th</sup> of 1995, offers a theoretical and legal framework for the protection of children with a rights-based approach on children's well-being. Its four general principles are 1) non-discrimination, 2) best interest of the child, 3) survival and development and 4) respect for the view of the child (Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1967). Refugee children have to be protected in their well-being according to these four principles.

## **Education**

Because of its importance in the development of a child, every child including a refugee child has the right to basic education (United Nations, 1948). Education can play a crucial role in making refugee children less vulnerable and in influencing especially the social and cognitive well-being of refugee children. Schools provide a place to learn, facilitate the development of peer relationships and help provide a sense of identity (Fazel, & Stein, 2002). For example, identity formation will largely take place at school, through interaction with others, contact

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with other ideas and new information, by change of perspective, experiment with roles and by self-reflection. Education provides numerous impulses that encourage this process (Fazel, & Stein, 2002). In particular, for refugee children, schools can play a vital part in their integration by becoming an anchor, not only for educational but also for social and emotional development and as an essential link with the local community. For example, participation in cultural activities is promoted at schools (Fazel, & Stein, 2002).

### **Empowerment**

Education can influence the empowerment of children and especially the empowerment of refugee children. Empowerment in the context of education has been defined as “an intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources” (Zimmerman, 1995). Crucial for empowerment are local interventions that yield participation of community members (Speer, Jackson, & Peterson, 2001). In education, empowerment is promoted, since it provides children with personal attention and structure while encouraging their socialization with peers and adults in the host society. In this capacity, school serves as a bridge for the refugee children to the new society, allowing them to be active members in their environment and to empower themselves in their social and cognitive well-being (Rousseau, & Guzder, 2008). Stimulating empowerment among people encourages that they gain a more positive well-being, because by being empowered people gain influence and control about their own lives and this helps them to obtain a positive well-being. For this study, empowerment implies a proactive approach and being able to influence or have control about life.

In this study, research will be conducted on educational factors that are contributing to empowering Zimbabwean refugee children in their social and cognitive well-being. The research question is: What factors in education contribute to empowering children of Zimbabwean refugees in social and cognitive well-being? Mostly refugee children themselves are participating in this study by individual interviews. However, to provide information about the context of the refugee children and to make use of better developed reflection skills and proficiency of English, also parents, teachers and principals of two refugee schools are participating in this study by individual interviews.



## Method

### Participants

Research and data collection took place in Johannesburg, South Africa. The aim of this study is to get information about which educational factors contribute to empowering the social and cognitive well-being of children of Zimbabwean refugees. In this research, two refugee schools are approached. The first school was a Refugee Project located at the Mandela College. The second school was the Refugee School. Sampling in this study is by way of a select sample, because contacts of locals have been used to reach schools. Spread across Johannesburg, (N=16) students have participated from the Refugee Project and the Refugee School. At each school eight learners were interviewed. The sample included seven girls (43,75 %) and nine boys (56,25 %). The average age of the students is 12 years old (SD = 1,41 years old, reach = 10 - 14 years old). They have been living in South Africa for at least a few months up to 11 years and they have been at the school for 3 months up to 5 years. They are going to school by bus, train or they walk. At home, the children speak Zulu, Shona, English and/or Lebethe. The children enrolled in the Project and the Refugee School are currently living in the surrounding downtown suburbs of Johannesburg, such as Yeoville, Berea and Hillbrow. These downtown suburbs are facing numerous problems, such as crime, sexual and gender violence, poverty, a housing scarcity and HIV/AIDS (Perumal, 2009).

Besides students, also teachers (N=4), parents (N=2) and a principal (N=1) have participated in this study. Unfortunately, during the research at the Refugee School, xenophobic attacks have taken place, aimed at foreigners in Johannesburg. As a consequence, the school has been closed, since safety of the children and staff could not be guaranteed. Due to this the planned interviews at this school have been carried out, except for the interviews with two parents from children.

The two interviewed parents of children from the Project were both 29 years old, female and came from Zimbabwe. The four teachers that were interviewed were between 36 and 46 years old, female and also came from Zimbabwe as refugees. They teach the subjects life orientation, life skills, English and/or math. The principal of the Refugee School that was interviewed was 43 years old, male and came from Zimbabwe. The principal of the Project was 53 years old, female and came from Rwanda, but she did not want to be interviewed. She has answered only a few questions about the Project on paper. She selected the children for the research, because she knew which children master English. All the interviewed refugee

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children could speak English, except for one who has only been in South Africa for 3 months. This interview took place with the help of a translator (a fellow student).

### **Procedure**

A qualitative data collection method was used. Qualitative research is suitable for this particular study, because of its focus on processes and meanings (Sale, Lohfeld, & Brazil, 2002). It is important to focus on processes and meanings to understand the complex situation from the viewpoint of refugee children, parents, teachers and the principal. Qualitative research was carried out through individual interviews with these four groups of participants. The individual interviews with children were approximately 25 minutes long and with the adult participants 30 minutes.

The research took place during school time at a venue at the schools. At the school of the Project, an empty classroom was used for conducting the interviews. At the Refugee School, there was no place in the school. Therefore the interviews took place in the schoolyard. The data collection of interviews on the Project took place from the 23<sup>th</sup> of March until the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2015. On the Refugee School the data collection took place from the 14<sup>th</sup> of April until the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2015. For the children, written consent to participate in the study and to audio record the interviews has been obtained from their parents or legal representatives. Written consent also has been obtained from the interviewed children who were 12 years old or older. Provisional ethical clearance was obtained by the University of Johannesburg and with the consent of the principals of the two schools<sup>2</sup>. All the collected data is anonymous, because pseudonyms are used for the participants and the two refugee schools. Only the involved researchers will have access to the data. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time during the study, but although this did not happen.

At the beginning of the interview first biographical questions were asked (see appendix 1 and 2). Second, the refugee children were asked what it meant for them to be a refugee, to feel good and to go to school, because I wanted to gain insight in their understanding of the concepts refugee, well-being and education (see appendix 1). All the adult participants were also asked about their notions of a refugee, education, well-being and,

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<sup>2</sup> The ethical clearance of this research is currently still under review by the Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg, but no problems are to be expected.

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in addition, about their notions of specifically social and cognitive well-being (see appendix 2). Third, to measure which educational factors affect the social and cognitive well-being of children of Zimbabwean refugees, indicators of the social and cognitive domain as defined and as described earlier by Pollard and Lee (2013) were used as topics in the interviews (see appendix 1). For example the interview questions about the indicator concentration were: “*Do you have a good concentration? Could you explain why you have/do not have a good concentration? Do you think you have a better concentration since you are attending school? Could you tell me why?*” Due to the age of the children, overlapping factors and negative constraints that could be involved when asking about factors, a selection of factors is used in the research: family relations, parent-child relations, participation in cultural activities, relationships with peers, social acceptance, peer problems and socioeconomic status/poverty for social well-being and academic achievement, cognitive ability, concentration, developmental delay and school behavior for cognitive well-being (see appendix 3). For the adult participants, the questions about the indicators of the social and cognitive domain were processed in the questions about empowerment, because in this way more connections between the different concepts were made. Fourth, the empowerment questions for refugee children included what kind of things in school are helping and are not helping a refugee child. Moreover, what they want to change in school was asked. For adults, it also included current activities for stimulating the social and cognitive well-being and suggestions for improvement (see appendix 1 and 2). At last, there was time for participants to reflect on the interview and to add something.

### **Analysis**

The interviews were recorded and transliterated. The qualitative data was analyzed with NVivo 10<sup>th</sup> edition by dividing the text into fragments (NVivo, 2014). One or more concepts could be attached to fragments of the interviews, which are indicated in the form of ‘codes’. In this research, a combination of the deductive and the inductive technique was used, because the six major themes of the analysis were based on literature and thereafter the themes were applied to obtained information to draw conclusions. The six major themes were: biographical details, concepts, social well-being, cognitive well-being, empowerment and reflection. For all the major codes a distinction has been made for the learners, parents, teachers and the principal. The biographical details codes were divided in the subcodes: facts

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and subjective descriptions. The social and cognitive well-being codes were divided in the subcodes: positive things, negative things, in general and since at school. The empowerment codes were divided in the subcodes: positive things in school, negative things in school and change in school for learners, positive things in education, negative things in education and change in education for parents, teachers and the principal. Once the coding was completed, further analysis has been carried out. This implies analysis (of the frequency) of the various codes. The final step was drawing conclusions from the results of the analysis and to formulate an answer to the research question.

### **Results**

#### **Respondents and context**

The research took place at two schools in Johannesburg, where education for refugee children is provided. The two refugee schools are assisting in helping refugee children to enter or re-enter at public schools. Despite not having the requisite legal documents to get access to public schools, the Project and the Refugee School are helping children to obtain school admission documents and to place the children at public schools.

At a refugee school, refugee children from other countries who are not able to enter mainstream education get access to education. The first school, the Refugee Project, is located at Mandela College, a private and privileged school in Johannesburg. The college runs the Project on the school (from 3 pm to 6 pm) and has taken the social responsibility to help disadvantaged refugee children with giving them access to education. The Project is using class rooms of the College after school hours. At this school the children will do their homework in the morning. There are approximately 150 refugee children between 5 and 13 years old enrolled in the Project. For the refugee children education is provided from grade one until grade six. The Project has a curriculum based on three subjects: numeracy, literacy and life skills.

The second school, the Refugee School, is a private and special school for refugee children in Johannesburg. The school provides access to education for refugee children during normal school hours (from 8.00 am to 3.30 pm). The Refugee School has a syllabus with Cambridge English and subjects such as math and life orientation. Primary education, as well as secondary education is available at the school. In order to help refugee children, the school has a dual purpose with regard to education. Education is directed on healing and

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rehabilitation and on skills development that will enable the refugee to earn a living in their new country of residence and participate in the future economic development of this country (Anonymous source, 2014).

The refugee schools are, in contrast to public schools, temporary schools to shelter refugee children and to get them ready for mainstream education. On a refugee school children are doing less subjects and school fees are lower compared to public schools. Furthermore, the holistic approach of the two refugee schools is characteristically different from public schools. This approach aims to increase the well-being of refugee children. Children who are enrolled in the Project receive a meal, school uniforms and free transport to and from the school. On the Refugee School a child gets food, clothing, counseling, free education and recreational facilities. Both the Project and the school are dependent on donations for the continuation of their activities.

In the text below the following six themes will be discussed: biographical details, concepts, social well-being, cognitive well-being, empowerment and reflection of the Zimbabwean refugee children, their parents, teachers and the principal of the school.

### **Biographical details**

Most of the children answered positively about their life in Zimbabwe, because they were learning there, had friends and they had not experienced bad things. A critical remark is that some of the children are indicating that they were very young when they left Zimbabwe (2 or 4 years old). Some of them were arguing they even can not remember how their life was in Zimbabwe. In the opinion of the children, they have left their country of origin, because of health, economic and/or safety reasons. Furthermore, they stated they have left Zimbabwe, because their parents or family were staying in South Africa or their parents wanted to go to South Africa. The refugee children were also mentioning that it was hard for them to go to school in Zimbabwe, because their parents had no money for paying the school fees. Some children explained that they came to South Africa to have education.

The parents told they came to South Africa because they wanted to have a better future in South Africa for themselves and for their children. Not only the children and parents are Zimbabwean refugees, but also the interviewed teachers are Zimbabwean refugees. The teachers told me that they sometimes talk with the Zimbabwean refugee children in their home language, because in this way the children understand new knowledge better. However,

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they explained that usually they use English. The aims of the schools are, according to the teachers and the two principals, to educate the refugee children, to create a safe environment and to teach children English to obtain places in public schools:

“So, the main aim is to teach them English, so that when they go to these other schools, the government schools. They will be able to understand and do their work that need to be done. Because if you get a new child, who has just arrived from these countries where they do not speak English. Uh, it will be difficult to teach (Lisa, 46).”

Moreover, the aims of the schools are for the principals to bring people together and advocate for the rights of refugee children.

### **Concepts**

To be a refugee child meant for the refugee children to go to another country, where you can have a better future. They mentioned difficulties of being a refugee as for example not speaking the local language, Zulu. Besides these difficulties, the refugee children were feeling happy being a refugee child in South Africa, because people are taking care of them and they get education and food. To feel good meant for them to go to school, to gain new knowledge and to stay with family. The children stated that by going to school they are not involved in criminal activities. In the long term they are convinced that because of going to school, they will have a better future and that they will be able to take care of their family.

For the parents, the understanding of the concept refugee is quite the same as it is for refugee children: someone who has left his or her country to go to another country for a better future. Their understanding of the concept education was that education enables children to speak and understand the language that is used in mainstream education, English. The parents mentioned that in the long term their children will probably have better jobs, because of education. Most parents found it hard to describe what well-being meant to them.

The teachers and the principal did not differ in their understanding of a refugee from the other participants, but they are adding reasons why refugees could leave their country of origin: for safety, economic and social reasons. The principal Desmond of the Refugee School (43) was describing a refugee as follows:

“A refugee is someone who is running away from his or her own country, because of persecution. Right. Life being in danger or run to another country where he or she will be expect to be safe.”

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Their understanding of education was that it is the key to get involved in the world, to become someone and make things better. The teachers and the principal were indicating that education teaches children good behavior and it makes someone able to communicate with others, learn and make their own choices. Contrary to the parents, the teachers and the principal had much to say about well-being. Well-being meant for them that basic needs are met. For example to be educated, to be free, living in good health and to have access to requisites for day to day life. Social well-being meant for them to communicate with other people. Cognitive well-being meant for the school staff to function well, be stable, settled, educated and as a result to acquire knowledge and skills.

### **Social well-being**

Research in this study is conducted on educational factors that are contributing to empowering Zimbabwean refugee children in their social and cognitive well-being. The main focus is on the opinion of the Zimbabwean refugee children about their social and cognitive well-being, because the opinions of the adult participants about the Zimbabwean refugee children's social and cognitive well-being, as mentioned before, are processed in the section about empowerment. According to the children's own opinion, their social well-being in general is well. The refugee children are especially positive about their contact with other people, family relations, parent-child relations, relationships with peers and social acceptance (see appendix 1). Besides that, they were mentioning that they do not have many problems with peers. The children argued that when they have contact with other people, they are respecting other persons and feel they can trust peers:

“My contact with other people is like to respect and to share my feelings with them and to share their problems with me (Jade, 10, 6 years in South Africa).”

However, the refugee children also were mentioning that they are bullied and violence is used to them, because they are foreigners:

“They are taking me like ‘kaffir’. I really do not like that (Steven, 12, 5 years in South Africa).”

Johan told me that kaffir is the most derogatory word for black people and was practiced by many whites at the time of Apartheid.

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Since they are going to school in South Africa, the Zimbabwean refugee children feel that they make improvements in their social well-being, especially in their contact with other people, both within and outside the family (see appendix 1). The children told me that they were liking the other children at school, and they help and understand each other:

“I: Do you like being with other children from your age more since you are here at school?

W: Yes, I do, because I have friends. They are like my brothers to me (William, 14, 7 years in South Africa).”

Furthermore, the children explained they have better contact with their family since they are attending school, because their family and they are more settled in South Africa. The teachers stated that by going to a refugee school the behavior of the child is shaped, the children engage in social interactions with other learners and are surrounded by other refugees in the same situation. The children told me they do not have many problems with peers or a higher socioeconomic status since they are at school. The refugee children were of the opinion that they are behaving nicely in school, because they know bad behavior has negative consequences. Half of the children were mentioning they participate more in cultural activities since they are at school, because drama, arts and cultures is taught at school. The other half does not, because these children said the school does not organize cultural activities at school. Depending on the school, children are also participating in cultural activities. This dichotomy is not caused by a difference between the two schools.

### **Cognitive well-being**

According to the Zimbabwean refugee children's opinion, their cognitive well-being in general is well. The children mentioned that it is especially going well with their academic achievement, school behavior, concentration and the children do not feel that they have a developmental delay. However, they think their cognitive ability is low (see appendix 1). Most of the refugee children said they found themselves to be smart. However, they were arguing that they do not know a lot, because they are not able to know everything:

“Because it is not able for us to know everything. I am not able to know so much. I only know, I only know what I am taught (Steven, 12, 5 years in South Africa).”

Since they are going to school in South Africa, the Zimbabwean refugee children feel that they make improvements in their cognitive well-being, especially in becoming smart and



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their academic achievement, cognitive ability, school behavior, concentration and developmental delay (see appendix 1). The refugee children are experiencing that they have become smarter since they are attending school, because they are learning a lot at school from the teachers. The teachers were of the opinion that they teach the children knowledge and skills. The refugee children told me they especially want to learn to speak English, to understand and speak to people. The adult participants mentioned that in Zimbabwe they also teach English, but most of the children were not able to speak English when they were attending the refugee school, because they were either too young to learn English at the Zimbabwean schools or they were not able to go to school in Zimbabwe. The refugee children are of the opinion that they can speak English very well now, due to the education in South Africa. At the refugee school the refugee children also feel that they learn to work. They said that they are doing their homework and they like to work and have good results:

“Because I am always trying to do my work, not to play. The teachers told me to do my school work to become an expert (Kate, 11, 2 years in South Africa).”

Most of the refugee children think they are at the same level as an average child of their age that attends school in South Africa, because they are using the same government books as in mainstream education. Some children said that they are not at the same level, because at other schools they have another syllabus with more subjects. However, one teacher stated that the refugee children are cognitively 3/4 years behind as compared to children attending public schools.

### **Empowerment**

According to the Zimbabwean refugee children, the parents, the teachers and the principal, the factors in education that are helping Zimbabwean refugee children to empower themselves in their social and cognitive well-being are: the teachers, they are learning at school, having meaningful activities during the day, they are getting basic necessities, they are with refugees of the same cultural background and other cultural backgrounds. The educational factors that were mentioned the most were learning (English) at school and getting basic necessities.

At first, the refugee children and the teachers were of the opinion that the teacher is helping the children to acquire knowledge and skills, which enables the children to become more empowered. Furthermore, the children and the teachers were both of the opinion that the

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teacher can serve as a role model for the refugee children and they are able to provide help to a refugee child from their own experiences as refugees. The children and especially the teachers were mentioning that they are facing a lot of the same challenges:

“I feel great. I like it so much because I am teaching children that are just like me, which is we are going through the same problems (Jennifer, 41).”

For example, the teachers and the principal were giving examples that the teachers could provide help with learning the children English, practical issues, adapting to a new environment and with questions regarding their identity as a refugee and as a South African.

Second, the refugee children are, according to the children, parents, teachers and the principal, learning subjects at school and as a result they are acquiring knowledge and skills. For example, subjects as English were in the opinion of the participants helping to empower refugee children in their social and cognitive well-being, because by learning English they are not dependent on other people anymore to come along in education and to communicate with others. Notable is also that during the interviews the refugee children were mentioning that they really want to learn and have the motivation to learn and pass exams. The children are convinced that by working hard and finishing school, this enables them to have a better future. The parents are also experiencing that their children are enthusiastic to go to school and work hard. In the opinion of the teachers and the principal, because of poverty and bad circumstances, refugee children have perseverance, a high motivation, are taking education seriously and they are doing extra curriculum activities. The teachers and the principal were arguing that education gives the refugee children hope and it prepares them for their future. They learn to work and as a result they can achieve a good job and a better life.

Third, the children were telling me that going to school and having meaningful activities during the day keeps them off the streets and that as a consequence they will not be engaged in criminal activities, for example stealing. Furthermore, the refugee children were of the opinion that education helps them against boredom and non-desired behavior, such as smoking, using drugs and drinking alcohol. The principal also supported this opinion:

“South Africa is a country which have got a high use of drugs. Especially for the youngsters, we want them to desist from all that thing. Make sure that we keep them busy, we educate them, so that they can not be involved in criminal activities (Desmond, 43).”

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Fourth, the refugee children were mentioning that they are getting basic necessities at the refugee school, such as free education, clothes and food. Also the parents, teachers and the principal are confirming this statement. According to the refugee children and the parents, the school has a personal approach, for example by paying the school fees for people who can not afford it. Furthermore, the principal added that the refugee school helps to find financial donors for the children and provide psychological support. According to the children, the parents, the teachers and the principal, refugee children are facing a lot of problems, especially in not having access to basic necessities. By providing basic necessities at the refugee school the principal argues that the school tries to limit the negative influence of their problems in education. For example, by providing food the principal told me that the school tries to limit the negative consequences of children that are not eating. The children and the teachers were mentioning that without eating it will be difficult for the teachers to teach the children and for the children to concentrate:

“I just wanted to add, like this small kids and others, they do not have food. They came here at school. They do not eat anything in the morning. They go back home, do not have anything. They are starving. No one can continue with not eating. I know that. If I am hungry, I can not talk to you. I sit here, I am hungry, so they will not be concentrating at school (William, 14, 7 years in South Africa).”

At last, in the opinion of parents it is really helping their children that at the refugee school the children are treated as normal, equal, human beings. The principal explained that in mainstream education there is a lot of xenophobia and discrimination against refugee children. The teachers and the principal were mentioning that at the refugee school the children feel accepted for who they are. Furthermore, the teachers and the principal told me that the children feel comfortable, because almost all the people at school are refugees and they are with people of the same cultural background. The principal argues that at the refugee school they are a community, where children feel safe and at home. The refugee children themselves also mentioned that they feel comfortable and protected at school. Moreover, the principal explained that refugee children learn at the refugee school to communicate with children from other origin, other cultures and who speak other languages. An important reason for this is that refugee children from different countries and with different cultural backgrounds are having access to education at the refugee school. The principal is convinced that by going to a

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refugee school, a child learns to respect other human beings. Sophie, a refugee child at the school, confirmed this during the interview:

“At school we learn more things and we learn to share and to respect all kinds of people (Sophie, 10, 4 years in South Africa).”

### **Reflection**

All the participants were experiencing their participation in the interview as positive. Most of the participants thanked me, because I showed interest and listened attentively to their opinions and stories. The participants were of the opinion that listening and showing interest in refugees does not happen very often in South Africa. In their view this happens not enough and it makes them feel that refugees are not included in South African society. They wish that one day refugees will be included in South African society, they can contribute to South Africa and become self-reliant.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

The right to basic education for refugees in South Africa ensures that also refugee children get access to education (CERT, 2012; Prinsloo, 2005). However, the violation of the right to education of refugee children is pervasive (CERT, 2012; Hlatshwayo, & Vally, 2014). As a result, special private refugee schools are developed to provide these children temporary education and to help them with making the transition to mainstream education (Anonymous source, n.d.). Refugees and refugee children are a vulnerable group. They are for instance at high risk for having or developing a negative well-being, because of their turbulent past and structural problems (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). It is of importance to conduct research about the education and well-being of refugee children, because research has shown that education can play a crucial role in reducing negative well-being and influencing well-being positively, especially the social and cognitive well-being of refugee children (Fazel, & Stein, 2002). Furthermore, well-being influences the quality of life of the refugee children and this enhances the vitality of society (Idemudia, Williams, & Wyatt, 2013). The research question of this study therefore is: What factors in education contribute to empowering children of Zimbabwean refugees in social and cognitive well-being?

As the results of the analysis show, the social and cognitive well-being of the refugee children are relatively high in their own opinion. Many indicators of the social and cognitive

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domain following Pollard and Lee (2003) are positively influenced since the refugee children were attending school. The indicators family relations, parent-child relations, relationships with peers and social acceptance of the social well-being domain and the indicators academic achievement, cognitive ability, school behavior, concentration and developmental delay of the cognitive well-being domain are found to function better since the refugee children were attending school. Only the indicators participation in cultural activities and socioeconomic status/poverty are not functioning much better since they were attending school.

The conclusion of this study is that the following educational factors are contributing to empower Zimbabwean refugee children's social and cognitive well-being: firstly, teachers have a profound influence on the empowerment of these children, serving as role models and helping the children from their own experiences. Furthermore, the fact that the refugee children are learning English creates a possibility for them to integrate in mainstream education and society. Besides that, education provides them with meaningful activities during the day; this reduces the risk of boredom or engaging in non-desired (criminal) behavior. Moreover, participation in refugee education provides the children with basic necessities. At last, the children feel comfortable and safe at the school and there is a lot of cultural diversity, being with other refugees of the same cultural background and from other cultural backgrounds.

This conclusion is indicating that refugee children first have to go to a refugee school to get ready to go to mainstream education. At mainstream education, as CERT (2012) and Hlatshwayo and Vally (2014) mentioned before, the refugee children are regularly denied access. As a result, these children are designated at the refugee school to get access to education and prepare and develop themselves there for mainstream education. At refugee schools, refugee children have teachers who serve as role models and who can offer help, the children learn English, they are getting basic necessities and they are with refugees of the same and other cultural backgrounds. For the refugee children, these factors in education are needed to empower themselves in their social and cognitive well-being. These factors are less present in mainstream education, where there is in the opinion of the participants, a smaller amount of refugee teachers, less assistance in helping children to master English, they are providing less basic necessities, there are less people with the same (cultural) background and there is less cultural diversity compared to refugee schools. Therefore it is also necessary for the refugee children to first enter a refugee school before entering mainstream education.

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As this study has shown, refugee children are not only responsible for their well-being, but their environment and especially their education also plays an important role in their social and cognitive well-being. It is very important for the well-being of refugee children to go to school. Notwithstanding the importance and the right for every child to go to school, not every refugee child in South Africa gets the chance to go to school. To achieve this, the South African government needs to take responsibility for the compliance of their constitution. The current South African school system needs to shift to a situation where every refugee child is able to go to (a public) school and have a good education. Therefore refugee children should not be denied access to mainstream education. The schools should get the responsibility to assist refugee children to function well, to assist with obtaining official documents and to arrange practical issues as school fees instead of denying children access to public schools on these characteristics. There is definitely need for a more structural, personal and solidary approach to provide healing, compassion and the fulfillment of the potential of refugee children in South Africa (CERT, 2012).

Furthermore, schools and especially schools for mainstream education have to pay attention to the mentioned educational factors to make sure the social and cognitive well-being of refugee children will be stimulated. To start with, schools should hire refugee teachers to have someone from the school staff who understands the refugee children or at least psychological support from counselors should be arranged. Schools also should assist refugee children in learning the English language that is used during lessons at schools. For example, by teaching them after school hours, providing children or parents material to work on at home or assisting them in finding other services which are able to help the children to improve their English. Furthermore, schools should provide basic necessities to make sure the children are functioning well on a minimum level. To accomplish this, schools should assist in finding financial donors to finance these basic necessities or schools could appeal to services for migrant children that provide basic necessities. Moreover, schools should have more attention for and a positive attitude towards cultural diversity. For example, by more inclusion of refugee children in mainstream school, teaching children about cultures, show children that people from other cultures are adding richness to South Africa and to promote contact with people from other cultures by organizing meetings with them. This is very important, especially if taken into account the turbulent past of Apartheid and present

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xenophobia in South Africa. Despite this promising conclusion, there are also some limitations of this study.

A limitation of this study was that the research took place in two refugee schools only. As a consequence, the data that has been collected is relatively limited and it is not possible to generalize to all refugee schools. Even between these two refugee schools both providing education for refugee children and the participants of these two schools, there were a lot of differences, for example the timeslots that the children are attending school. Furthermore, it is not possible to generalize the data to all schools, because this study specifically investigated refugee schools and not public schools that are part of mainstream education. Refugee schools and public schools are differing a lot as mentioned before, for example refugee schools are teaching less subjects and school fees are lower compared to public schools. However, it is important to take the conclusion of this research in consideration for mainstream education, because the results could also provide guidelines to empower Zimbabwean refugee children in their social and cognitive well-being in mainstream education.

Another limitation is that not all participants are proficient in speaking English on a high level. Sometimes it was hard to know if they really understood the question. Despite the bias that could occur from the selection of the refugee children on their ability to speak English by the principal of one school, I believe that she has chosen the most suitable children for conducting the interviews. Moreover, as mentioned before a disadvantage was that at the Refugee School the interviews took place at the schoolyard. This sometimes caused a lot of noise during the interviews. Also disturbing was that during the interviews sometimes people came in or cell phones were ringing. Besides that, participants could also have given more positive answers on the interview questions, because during the interviews the adults mentioned that refugees and the refugee school were vulnerable and by giving a negative image the adults were afraid this could have negative consequences. For example, they were afraid of the negative consequences that the school has to close down and efforts could be made to set in sanctions for Zimbabweans or refugees as a whole. It is also important to keep in mind that the participants are already very grateful for the chance of going to school.

Recommendations for further study are to interview more participants, to construct more interview questions about each subject, to investigate other domains of well-being, to conduct besides qualitative research also quantitative research and to compare refugee children at refugee schools with (refugee) children at public schools. This is important to gain

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more detailed insight into processes, meanings and mechanisms that are involved in the education, empowerment and well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children. To ensure that the participants will correctly understand the interview questions, a qualified translator could be used or someone who speaks the language of the participants could do the research. These options reached beyond the scope of the present investigation, but could be addressed in future research.

Summarized, this study has shown that several educational factors are contributing to empower Zimbabwean refugee children's social and cognitive well-being. The most important education factors are learning (English) at school and getting basic necessities. These factors should play a more important role in debates concerning the education, empowerment and well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Individual interview schedule for the learners

Date: 22-03-2015

*Biographical details*

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender? Are you a boy or a girl?
3. Which grade are you in?
4. How was your life in Zimbabwe?
5. Why did you leave your country of origin?
6. How is your life in South Africa?
7. How long have you lived in South Africa?
8. What are your feelings about being in South Africa?
9. What do you think of your school?
10. How long have you been at this school?
11. What type of transport do you use to go to school?
12. What is your home language?
13. What other languages do you speak well?
14. How well do you rate your ability to speak English?
15. In what type of dwelling do you stay in?
16. How many people stay with you at your home?
17. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

*Concepts*

1. What does it mean for you to be a refugee child?
2. What does it mean for you to feel good?

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3. What does it mean for you to go to school?
4. Are you happy at school? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively).*

### *Social well-being*

1. How is your contact with other people? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively).* How does that make you feel? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively).*
2. Do you have better contact with other people since you are attending school? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively).* If yes, could you explain it?
3. Could you talk with your family including your brothers and sisters about things that worry you? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively).* Do you know why?
4. Do you have a better relation with your family since you are attending school? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively).* If yes, could you explain why?
5. Could you talk with your father and mother about things that worry you? *(86.67% of the refugee children answered positively).* Do you know why?
6. Do you have a better relation with your father and mother since you are attending school? *(92.86% of the refugee children answered positively).* If yes, why do you think that is the case?
7. Are you participating in cultural activities, like for example music, theatre, and art? *(62.5% of the refugee children answered positively).* How often are you participating?
8. Do you participate more in cultural activities since you are attending school? *(53.33% of the refugee children answered positively).* If yes, could you explain why?
9. Do you like being with other children from your age? *(100% of the refugee children answered positively).* What do you think is an important reason for that?
10. Do you like being with other children from your age more since you are attending school? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively).* If yes, could you explain it?
11. Do others like to be with you? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively).*  
Why do you think others like/do not like to be with you?

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12. Do you think others like to be with you more since you are attending school? *(81.25% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, why do you think that is the case?
13. Do you have problems with peers? *(6.25% of the refugee children answered positively)*. Why do/ do not you have problems with peers?
14. Do you have more problems with peers since you are attending school? *(12.5% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, do you know why?
15. How many toys do you have? *(37.5% of the refugee children answered positively)*.
16. Do you have more toys since you are attending school? *(25% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, could you explain why?

### *Cognitive well-being*

1. Do you think you are really smart compared to your class mates? *(68.75% of the refugee children answered positively)*. How does that make you feel?
2. Do you think you have become much smarter since you are attending school? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, do you know why?
3. Do you have good results? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively)*. Why do/ do not you have good results?
4. Do you have better results since you are attending school? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, could you explain why?
5. Do you think you know a lot? *(31.25% of the refugee children answered positively)*. Why do/do not you know a lot?
6. Do you think you know more since you are attending school? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, do you know why?
7. Are you behaving well? *(100% of the refugee children answered positively)*. Why do you think that is the case?
8. Do you think you behave better since you are attending school? *(100% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, what do you think is an important reason for that?

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9. Do you have a good concentration? *(100% of the refugee children answered positively)*. Could you explain why you have/ do not have a good concentration?
10. Do you think you have a better concentration since you are attending school? *(93.75% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, could you explain why?
11. Are you learning a lot at school? *(100% of the refugee children answered positively)*. What for example? Is it easy or difficult for you to learn?
12. Do you think you learn a lot since you are attending school? *(87.5% of the refugee children answered positively)*. If yes, why do you think that is the case?
13. Do you think you are on the same level as an average child of your age that goes to school in South Africa? *(81.25% of the refugee children answered positively)*. Why do/do not you think you are on the same level?

### *Empowerment*

1. What kind of things in school feel like it is really helping you getting settled? Why does it feel like it is really helping you getting settled? Could you give me more examples?
2. What kind of things in school feel like it is not helping you getting settled? Why does it feel like it is not helping you getting settled? Could you give me more examples?
3. What would you like to change in school for yourself or for other children from Zimbabwe like yourself? Why do you want to change it?

### *Reflection*

1. Is there anything you like to add to the things we talked about today?
2. How was the interview for you?

Thank you so much for your time and help.

# EDUCATIONAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EMPOWERING ZIMBABWEAN REFUGEE CHILDREN' S SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE WELL-BEING

## Appendix 2: Individual interview schedule for adults

Date: 22-03-2015

### *Biographical details*

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender? Are you a male or a female?
3. What subjects are you currently teaching? (for teachers)
4. Which grade(s) are you teaching? (for teachers)
5. From which country do you come from? (for all) How do you think this affects your relationship with the Zimbabwean refugee children? (for teachers)
6. Could you describe the work you are doing as a principal/teacher? (for teachers and principal)
7. How do you feel about working on this school? (for teachers and principal)
8. Why is your child going to this school? How do you feel about that? (for parents)
9. What is the specific approach of the school? How is it different from the approach of normal schools? (for all)
10. What are the aims of the school? (for all)
11. What are the benefits for a child to go to this school? (for all)
12. How does a school day for a child look like? (for all)

### *Concepts*

1. What is your understanding of a refugee?
2. What is your understanding of education?
3. What is your understanding of well-being?
4. What is your understanding of social well-being?
5. What is your understanding of cognitive well-being?

## EDUCATIONAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EMPOWERING ZIMBABWEAN REFUGEE CHILDREN' S SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE WELL-BEING

### *Social well-being*

1. In general, do you think education influences the social well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children? If so, how?
2. In terms of education, what do you think is working well for the social well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children? Why do you think this is working well? Could you give me more examples?
3. In terms of education, what do you think is not working for the social well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children? Why do you think this is not working? Could you give me more examples?
4. What is the school currently doing to stimulate the social well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children?
5. What suggestions would you have to improve the social well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children in relation to education? Why do you think this will improve their social well-being?

### *Cognitive well-being*

1. In general, do you think education influences the cognitive well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children? If so, how?
2. In terms of education, what do you think is working well for the cognitive well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children? Why do you think this is working well? Could you give me more examples?
3. In terms of education, what do you think is not working for the cognitive well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children? Why do you think this is not working? Could you give me more examples?
4. What is the school currently doing to stimulate the cognitive well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children?
5. What suggestions would you have to improve the cognitive well-being of (Zimbabwean) refugee children in relation to education? Why do you think this will improve their cognitive well-being?



EDUCATIONAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EMPOWERING ZIMBABWEAN REFUGEE CHILDREN' S SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE WELL-BEING

*Reflection*

1. Is there anything you like to add to the things we talked about today?

Thank you so much for your time and help.

EDUCATIONAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EMPOWERING ZIMBABWEAN REFUGEE CHILDREN' S SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE WELL-BEING

Appendix 3: Table 1

Table 1

*Indicators of the social and cognitive domain of well-being*

Social domain	
<i>Literature</i>	<i>Research</i>
1. Parent-child relations	1. Parent-child relations
2. Participation in cultural activities	2. Participation in cultural activities
3. Relationships with peers	3. Relationships with peers
4. Social acceptance	4. Social acceptance
5. Peer problems	5. Peer problems
6. Socioeconomic status (SES)	6. Socioeconomic status (SES)/poverty
7. Poverty	
8. Family relations	7. Family relations
9. Relationships at home	
10. Troubled home relationships	
11. Quality of life	-
Cognitive domain	
1. Academic achievement	1. Academic achievement
2. Cognitive ability	2. Cognitive ability
3. Concentration	3. Concentration
4. Developmental delay	4. Developmental delay
5. School function and school-related behaviors	5. School behavior
6. School behavior problems	

Note: The indicators of the social and cognitive domain are derived from the article of Pollard and Lee (2003).

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