



Sustainable Learning in the Context of Repatriated Migration to Zimbabwe: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This article critically examined the envisaged forced return migration of Zimbabwean nationals who migrated to South Africa because of political and socio-economic turmoil and rising levels of poverty in their country of origin. The research also focused on how the return is likely to impact the sustainable learning and psycho-social well-being of children of school-going age. The push and pull factors model were used as the conceptual frame with which to understand dynamics of migration, including return migration. The data for the study were generated through structured face-to-face interviews with five purposively selected Zimbabwean parents with children of school going age and residing in South Africa. This was triangulated with data obtained through telephonic interviews with five teachers residing in Zimbabwe. The data were coded and analysed thematically and using verbatim statements from the participants. The study established that the anticipated forced return of Zimbabwean migrants would cause disruptions to both continuity of learning and learning outcomes of returnee children at both primary and secondary school. It was also revealed that the return migration posed a major threat to children's psycho-social adjustment and well-being. The major recommendations include the need to support and capacitate, schools and communities with know-how and resources to re-integrate migrants into educational institutions, home environments and communities.

Keywords: Return migration; psychosocial health; children; education; reintegration.

Introduction

In 2010, the South African government granted undocumented Zimbabwean migrants permits under a programme called Dispensation Zimbabwean Programme (DZPs) in a move that was meant to stabilise and legalise thousands of illegal Zimbabweans that had fled political and socio-economic turmoil and rising levels of poverty and suffering in Zimbabwe (Nyakabawu, 2021). The DZP permits, which were valid for four years from 2010 to December 2014, enabled many Zimbabweans to seek paid employment, study and do business in South Africa and thus bringing stability and hope to migrant lives (Bimha, 2017) and tremendously contributing to the growth of the South African economy. When the DZP permits came to an end in 2014, they were replaced with Zimbabwe Special Permits (ZSP) from January 2014 to December 2017 which in turn were

replaced with the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits (ZEP) from January 2018 to December 2021.

In 2021 the South African government indicated its decision to terminate the ZEP and advised affected parties to apply for alternative permit categories by June 2023. This presented a huge challenge to many ZEP permit holders, many of whom were ordinary Zimbabweans without any specialised skills, which were key requirements in transitioning to alternative permits. This brought a high sense of insecurity and uncertainty on the realisation that those who would not meet the rigorous requirements for mainstream permits would be deported back to Zimbabwe. The forced return would inflict untold disruption to the education of returning migrants' children particularly at primary and secondary school level. First, the unplanned return would mean that children would have to be uprooted from their

schools at the middle of the year and it is unlikely that there would be adequate open spaces and resources in the Zimbabwean education system to cater for such large numbers who would have been deported from South Africa. How the education system would cope with the unprecedented numbers of returning students from an infrastructural, pedagogical and curriculum content point of view remain critical questions that are of concern and preoccupation of this paper.

Secondly, the South African high school education system is significantly different from the Zimbabwean one and this poses a potential problem relating to how returning children would overtly fit and integrate seamlessly within a context of a completely different educational system. Importantly, the South African University entrance qualification is a Matric Certificate which is acquired after five years of studying at high school level. What is problematic here is that, the Matric certificate is one year less than the University entrance Zimbabwean Advanced level certificate which is acquired after six years of studying at high school in Zimbabwe. Therefore, migrant students holding Matric qualifications who would leave South Africa for Zimbabwe may find it extremely difficult to gain admission to Zimbabwean Universities and in some cases students may be forced to repeat certain levels so as to attain a requisite qualification.

Conceptualisation of key terms

This study revolves around key concepts which are explained below in order to establish a common understanding of their use in this paper.

Sustainable learning

Sustainable learning refers to learning that endures over time and supports long-term personal and social well-being. It involves the acquisition of critical skills and competencies and life-long learning that can be applied to different situations.

Psychosocial well being

This refers to an individual's overall state of and well-being health including aspects such as emotional, psychological and mental balance.

Returnee children

In this article returnee children refers to children of migrant parents who return to their countries of origin together with their parents. Grosa and King (2023) identify two categories of return migrant children. The first category relates to those children who were born abroad by their migrant parents. When their parents decide to return to their original country, such children appear like they are migrating to a new country since they have never experienced life in their country of origin. The next group of children refers to those who were born in the country of origin and taken abroad by their parents at an early age. Statistically, such children are true returnees while the former appear less so. In this paper, the term returnee children is used to refer to both categories of children (those born in country of origin and taken abroad by parents and those born abroad by their migrant parents).

Reintegration

This refers to the process whereby migrants who return to their home country re-adapt or how they are assisted to re-establish themselves socially, economically and psychologically after living abroad. It comprises three interconnected dimensions namely, economic reintegration, social reintegration and psychological reintegration.

Economic reintegration involves how the returnees earn a living either through finding employment or utilising acquired skills while abroad. It also focuses on how the returnees manage their livelihood through businesses, projects and entrepreneurial activities. Social reintegration has to do with the individual's ability to rebuild relationships with the community and to readapt to social networks, societal norms and culture.

Psychological reintegration relates to the migrant's ability to restore a sense of identity, comfort, relief and belonging. It involves the individual's ability to cope with reverse culture shock, trauma and stress as well as unadapting to the culture one has acquired whilst abroad.

Research Question

The main research question for this study was: How does repatriated migration impact on the

learning and psychosocial well-being of returnee children? This research question was further broken down into more focused sub-research questions as set out below:

- How does return migration influence high-school learners' progression to universities in Zimbabwe?
- How does return migration influence the psychosocial well-being of primary-school learners returning home from South Africa?
- What strategies of integrating returnee learners should be in place in schools?

Conceptual framework

This study used the macro-sociological push and pull factors model as enunciated by Bijack (2006). The starting point of this model is the observation that migration, (of which return migration is a part), is initiated by the presence of attracting pull factors at the destination country and repelling push factors at the country of origin (Agadjanian, 2013). These factors can be classified as hard and soft ones. Hard factors include radical circumstances such as humanitarian crises, environmental hazards and armed conflict while the soft ones include factors such as unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. According to Itula-Abumere (2013), return migration can be characterised broadly as being either voluntary or forced or involuntary thus indicating the degree of choice or lack thereof which the migrants are able to exercise in the decision to move. Vela (2014) raises the problematic nature of treating forced migration and voluntary migration as opposites of each other, opting to regard these as part of a continuum. This argument is based on the realisation that a migrant who makes a voluntary decision to migrate is to a certain extent 'forced' into migrating by his or her economic and social circumstances or those of one's households. In essence this argument implies that any form of migration or return migration has an element of force which may be either overt or covert. Following on the logic, it can be concluded that if living conditions or related factors were ideal at all times, there may be no need for migration by any group of people.

The current study examines the issue of return migration that is precipitated by the South African government's decision not to renew permits for Zimbabwean immigrants and thus characterises this type of return as involuntary or forced return. It is important to note that return migration does not only become forced migration because of decisions or policies taken by nation states or border and immigration control policies. Rather, the family can also be a source of force when it decides to return to its country of origin when such decisions are perceived as involuntary by the teenage children in the same family. The forced return of children is of crucial importance to this study since it signifies the violation of children's rights and dignities experienced during return migration.

Literature review

Return migration

A thorough interrogation of literature revealed that migration is an age-old phenomenon that has become an integral aspect of national economies and family life in many parts of the world (Ndreka, 2019). Ochs (2006) reported that over 175 million people of the world's population are living in countries other than those in which they were born. An important aspect of migration is return migration. Although return migration was not given prominence in the past, it is fast assuming a central position in international migration discourses. Return migration encompasses various forms of moving back to one's country of birth such as voluntary return, forced removal, repatriation, deportation and assisted return (Weldemariam, 2023).

According to Grosa and King (2023), return migration is a complex and multidimensional process that can have far reaching impact on individuals, families and communities as well as countries involved. As Weldemariam (2023) observes, return migration can impact both the sending and receiving country in terms of social, economic and cultural factors by influencing labour markets, social networks and cultural norms and practices.

According to Bijack (2006) return migration is mainly described through push and

pull factors or through deterrent and stay factors. Push factors include economic hardship and lack of social contacts in host countries which predispose individuals and groups of people to migrate. On the contrary, pull factors can result from the desire for family reunification or improvements in livelihood opportunities in the countries of origin. OECD (2024) regard families of migrants and the communities to which they return as primary drivers that influence the return decision and reintegration experience both in terms of the way returnees are perceived and the resources available for their reintegration. The social and cultural conditions of family life in the origin country may attract migrants back home to raise their own families. These same conditions may also discourage some migrants from returning with their families. Importantly, communities also play a role in the return decision, particularly in influencing perceptions of return (Ochs, 2006).

Current research has shown particular interest in exploring the complexities and difficulties experienced by migrants upon their return to their countries of origin (Enren et al., 2022). What seems to be a gap within existing studies is the lack of sufficient attention to the role of children in return migration and the impact of return on children of returning migrants' (Grosa & King, 2023) educational and psychosocial well-being.

Grosa and King (2023) identify two categories of return migrant children. The first category relates to those children who are born abroad by their migrant parents. When their parents decide to return to their original country, such children appear like they are migrating to a new country since they have never experienced their country of origin. The next group of children refers to those who were born in the country of origin and taken abroad by their parents at an early age. Statistically, such children are true returnees while the former appears less so. However, in this paper, the term returnee children is used to refer to both categories of children (those born in country of origin and taken abroad by parents and those born abroad by their migrant parents). This paper seeks to explore the impact of return migration on the sustainable learning and psychosocial well-being of children.

Reintegration models

The issue of reintegration occupies a central place in return migration scholarship. While existing literature is awash with information on reasons for return migration, it remains very scanty on models of reintegration of returnees and their children. This is a matter of huge concern since reintegration is an essential component of return migration that affects returnees in profound ways (Dulce and Menjivar, 2015). A critical dimension of return migration relates to the question of what happens to children of school-going age upon the return of their families to their home countries. The question of how returnee children manage the complexities of integrating into a new environment and school system, with a different curriculum, different pedagogical approaches that are delivered in a language that may be very unfamiliar remains unanswered. This is not merely an educational problem but also raises the issue of disruptions to the psycho-social wellbeing of the return migrant children (Shava and Heystek, 2015).

OECD (2024) contends that return decisions and reintegration outcomes are affected by the presence of children. Conversely, when children do not speak their mother tongue, parents face difficulties in finding a suitable school upon return. Families are forced to invest in private tutoring, and it can take several years for children to catch up with their peers (Itula-Abumere, 2016). Returning migrants may isolate themselves out of shame and guilt, hampering their ability to rebuild social networks

Vathi and King (2021) believe that resources available in families and communities to which migrants return are key factors in shaping their integration. The two authors expound on this observation by contending that families provide reintegration support in the form of housing, financial, moral and psycho-social support to returning migrants including their children. Lulle (2017) alludes to this view by postulating that family support for reintegration is particularly important for vulnerable returnees who do not have much resources. Communities also play an important part in the reintegration process by ensuring that services are in place to support

returning migrants. Gonda (2017), while not disputing the role of the family in integrating returnees, argues that it is not sufficient on its own to achieve this role. The same author aptly argues that in the absence of overarching support mechanisms provided by public services, families can become overwhelmed by the situation and, in the worst cases, reject vulnerable migrants.

Underlining the role of the community in the reintegration process, OECD (2024) observes that community members act as bridges to connect returnees, some of whom have been abroad for many years, with the right people and to enable social networks and socio-cultural integration. Community organisations are often the best placed actors to provide certain forms of support to returnees. While this is largely the case, it is important to point out that community stigma can also act as an obstacle to considering returnee integration.

Impact of return migration on the progression of high school learners.

To appreciate the impact of return migration on children's learning, it is important that one understands the structural differences between the South African and the Zimbabwean high school system as a starting point. This section therefore foregrounds these structural differences and their attendant impact on the children's educational progression and psycho-social well-being.

The South African secondary education system has a duration of five years starting from grade eight to twelve. Secondary school comprise of two phases namely, lower secondary which stretches from grade eight up to grade nine and then upper secondary (FET) phase which stretches from grade 10 to grade 12. At grade 12 students write the school leaving examination commonly referred to as Matric examination (Ehren et al., 2022). This examination comprises seven subjects which the student will have started at grade 10. In contrast the Zimbabwean secondary school has a duration of six years starting from form one and stretching up to form six before a student can enrol for university study. Secondary school is segmented into three levels namely junior secondary level, Ordinary level (O-Level) and

Advanced level (A-Level). The junior secondary school level is made up of forms 1 and 2 while O-Level includes forms 3 and 4 and A-level is constituted of form 5 and 6 (Marongedza et al., 2023). At advanced level (form 5 and 6) students study 3 subjects which are selected in accordance with their vision for university study. In order to obtain an advanced level certificate a student need to have passed the three subjects with grade A, B, C or D (Nziramasanga, 1999).

Unlike the South African high school system where students write one national examination at Matric, the Zimbabwean high school system requires students to write two national examinations one at O-level and the other one at A-Level. This raises the issue of whether the two qualifications are really at par. How will students leaving South Africa with matric certificates compare with their counterparts in Zimbabwe who will be holding Advanced level certificates? How will Zimbabwean universities treat the return migrant students who hold matric certificates when they have all along been used to admitting students on the basis of their Advanced level certificates. These structural complexities and differences have a potential to disrupt the smooth transition to Zimbabwean universities of returning immigrant students.

Impact of return migration at the psycho-social level of learners

Ndreka (2019) makes a cogent observation that children with no experience in the culture of their homeland face problems in adjusting to their new location and managing issues of identity and belonging. This suggests that the educational reintegration of returnee children from South Africa and how to capacitate them for adaptation and transition to a new school system in Zimbabwe may pose momentous challenges. Firstly and as noted by Shava and Heystek (2015), Zimbabwean schools, which in essence should be key platforms where returnee children experience reintegration, are not structured in the best way to enable them to receive children coming from a different educational system. The crux of the argument is that many teachers in Zimbabwe do not have expertise in managing children from different backgrounds and origins

and this has a huge bearing not only on the children's learning outcomes but also affects their psycho-social development. Ideally teachers, need to be agile and be able to deal with diversity, tolerance and differentiated learning.

Returnee children, particularly those who were born outside the country, experience numerous sociolinguistic and socialisation challenges as they try to integrate into a new cultural and educational system (Gheghina et al, 2020). As Bimha (2017) expresses, uprooting children from a familiar to a completely new educational system inflicts far reaching effects on their psychological well-being. If returning children struggle to integrate into the Zimbabwean schools, this may give rise to underachievement and dropping out (Grosa & King, 2022). This situation is likely to be exacerbated by the fact that most teachers in Zimbabwe did not receive specialised training in dealing with children from different backgrounds and origins and so they lack capacity to provide differentiated learning.

Grosa and King (2022) assert that children of migrant parents experience a process of 'double othering' in the host country (South Africa in this case) and in their parental homeland (Zimbabwe) upon their return. The same authors explains further that the children were othered in the RSA schools and they are othered again in Zimbabwean schools upon their return due to their South Africanness and their inability to speak the local languages fluently. This is related to what White et al., (2011) regard as the 'us and them' attitudes and sentiments that tend to develop in the school culture and environment which results in the returnees being treated as outsiders and sometimes isolated. This can lead to marginalisation and discrimination being perpetuated and this can affect interactional patterns with implications on their psycho-social well-being, learning experiences and learning outcomes.

A study conducted by Dulce and Menjivar (2015) on Mexican American children returning to Mexico revealed several challenges that are faced by returnee children, which problems include the challenge of integrating into Mexican schools and thus leading to academic

underachievement and high dropout rates. The problem was exacerbated by teachers' inability to deal with students adapting to different cultural norms and unfamiliar pedagogical practices.

Lulle (2017) makes a cogent observation that to the extent that they have different life experiences and cultural attributes, returnee children tend to be regarded as partial outsiders. Gherghina et al., (2020) extend on this view by remarking that returnee children are likely to be bullied due to the various traits that differentiate them from others such as accent, lack of proficiency in the local languages, different mannerisms, interests and cultural norms. Invariably this makes the returnee children vulnerable to undesirable and undercurrent practices such as teasing, ridiculing and bullying by fellow students. This view finds expression in a study by Vathi and King (2021) of Albanian children who were returning from Greece after the Greek financial crises. The study established that the local children were experienced as rough with frequent pushing and shoving swearing and misbehaving.

A study conducted by White et al., (2011) in the West of Ireland has indicated that returnee children from Britain and the USA did not experience the problem of language barrier, but they had a challenge with their different accent for which they were teased by other children. Similar findings were made by Lulle (2017) in a study of Latvian youth returnees. The study noted the embarrassment of having a foreign accent and language deficiencies as the major experiences faced by returnees which often led to psychosocial withdrawal. Returnee children, particularly those who were born in the host country, tend to be treated as strangers, and discriminated against in subtle ways which result in disillusionment, alienation and depression (Gonda, 2017). This is alluded to by Lulle (2017) who makes an insightful point that to the extent that returnee children bring different life experiences and altered cultural characteristics they are regarded as partial outsiders.

Methods

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of the impending repatriation of

Zimbabwean nationals living in South Africa on the sustainable learning of returnee children. The study specifically sought to understand how children's learning continuity, learning outcomes and psycho-social integration would be impacted by the forced return to Zimbabwe. Structured face-to-face interviews were held with five Zimbabwean parents (two men and three women) residing in South Africa and had children of school going age. These were selected through the snowballing approach. Five Zimbabwean teachers (two secondary and three primary) were conveniently selected from those teachers in Zimbabwe whom the researcher was familiar with to participate in structured telephonic interviews. Parents would provide information about how the learning of their children would be disrupted because of the anticipated return migration while teachers would provide information relating to schools' ability to cope with large influx of returnees, strategies for integration and impact of return on social and emotional well-being of children. In this way, both teachers and parents were considered as being information rich (Tracey, 2019). Both face-to-face interviews for the parents and telephonic interviews with teachers were semi-structured although probes were made to access rich and meaningful data (Anas & Ishaq, 2022). Both structured interview data from parents and telephonic interview data with teachers were coded and analysed in terms of themes and categories and verbatim statements

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the collection of data, the researcher introduced himself and spelt out the purpose of the research to participants. Parents were informed in a face-to-face engagement while teachers were informed telephonically. The researcher reassured the participants' of their right to anonymity and confidentiality as well as their right to withdraw from the research process at any time they felt so. Fortunately none of the participants withdrew from the study. Participants were requested to indicate acceptance to participate in the study by completing acceptance and consent forms. Participants were also informed that their responses would be recorded and they consented to that.

Results

This section presents findings obtained through structured face-to-face and telephonic interviews with parents and teachers respectively. Data from the two groups of participants is presented together under each theme to enable data triangulation.

Influence of migration on learning continuity /further schooling

Parents were unanimous that forced return migration would affect the continuity of learning for their children. The issue of different school calendars and learning programmes were cited as major problems that would be faced by most children. Two parents doubted whether children who are forced to return to a completely different education system would be able to make immediate adjustment and be assimilated into the new education system. Another important factor that was raised had to do with teachers who would find it difficult to accommodate children who are coming from a completely different education system. These sentiments from parents were corroborated by views from teachers. For instance two teachers responded that children coming from South Africa would need to repeat a year so that they start with others on the same level. Teachers indicated that school syllabi differ widely across provinces in the same country and this becomes even worse across countries. The following extracts from two parents and two teachers were apt:

Parent A: *If my children are forced to leave South Africa in August or September how are they going to connect with what was learnt in Zimbabwe since the start of the year.*

Parent B: *Children will need time to learn new things and in a different learning environment with different teachers. This requires planning and cannot be achieved in a chaotic and rushed manner as will be the case with the anticipated influx of returnee children from South Africa.*

Parent C: *I have two children of school-going age both of whom were born in South Africa. The only home they have known since birth is South Africa and I am wondering how they will be able to adapt to a new learning environment where*

everything is completely new to them. There is a huge risk that they will be regarded as strangers and this may affect their learning (Parent of two children).

Teacher 1: *The unplanned return will affect children very much since they cannot be uprooted from a completely different education system one night and then planted into another one the next day. The educational systems are very different and this unexpected migration will cause serious disturbances to children's learning.*

Teacher 2: *It remains to be seen how schools in Zimbabwe, which are already full, will be able to accommodate a sudden influx of large numbers of students. Current classrooms are not coping well with students and this becomes a nightmare with the unexpected numbers coming from South Africa.*

Learning space, infrastructure and resources

When asked how returnee children would find accommodation in Zimbabwean schools from a resource and infrastructure point of view parents expressed pessimism. One parent responded thus:

Parent C: *If current classes in Zimbabwean schools do not have adequate furniture, how will it be possible to accept more children.*

Parent D: *Most children will be forced to stay at home because of the overwhelming numbers. In urban areas current schools are not capable of providing enough space to students and this is set to worsen with the return of migrant children.*

These sentiments were corroborated by teachers who had this to say:

Teacher 3: *The forced return will inject many more children and students into the education system and the system will collapse. Perhaps the government would have to consider going back to the double session learning where one stream learns in the morning while the other learns in the afternoon but sharing the same classroom and resources. However, this will have a huge implication on salary costs and quality of learning. A number of schools are currently understaffed due to government's financial*

sustainability measures. One wonders how things will work out if thousands and thousands of more children are added into the system. Obviously this will require the government to employ more teachers whilst it is not capable of paying existing teachers meaningful and living salaries.

Language Barriers

The parents raised the concern that a number of their children of school going age were born in South Africa and they have mastered the mother language of the places where they were staying. The critical issue raised was that many of these were not able to speak their home language in Zimbabwe. This would certainly affect their progression in learning since they will be forced to learn a new language. A conundrum that was raised was that even those children coming from South Africa did not necessarily speak the same home language since home languages varied across different regions of the country.

The following sentiments from three parents were representative:

Parent 3: *I left Zimbabwe in 2008 and came to stay in the Eastern Cape. My son was born in 2012 and now he is 13 years old. He has become very fluent in IsiXhosa which is also her home language at school. He is not able to speak Shona at all and yet in Zimbabwe he will be expected to learn Shona language. This will be a gruelling experience for him.*

Similar sentiments were echoed by another parent who said:

My daughter was studying Afrikaans as her home language and yet in Zimbabwe Afrikaans is not taught in schools particularly in rural areas. I just do not know how this problem will be managed otherwise my daughter will suffer heavily in her learning.

Similarly teachers who were interviewed telephonically had this to say on the same matter:

Teacher 4: *The language policy in Zimbabwe is very different from the South African one. With regards to home language all children have to choose between either Shona or Ndebele. On the contrary, children in South choose a home language based on the region in which the school*

is located. Children can choose IsiXhosa, ChiVenda, Siswati, Sipedi, SiZulu but all these languages do not have a place in the Zimbabwean school curriculum. This is an uncharted territory where no one has answers to these challenges.

Strategies for re-integration

Parents did not have much to say on strategies for integration. Their inputs centred on the need for increased funding of schools to enable them to buy more furniture and resources so they can accommodate more learners. Two parents also suggested that schools should have feeding schemes for all learners to ensure their physiological needs are catered for. One parent raised the need to empower community organisations through non-governmental funding to ensure they are able to support the reintegration of returning migrants.

Parent A: *Many parents who return to Zimbabwe from South Africa hardly have any homes still existing in Zimbabwe as these homes were destroyed during their long period of stay away in South Africa. Their focus will be on rebuilding the family homes and securing food and very little resources will be left to support their children who attend school. Parents especially staying in rural areas will find this a huge problem and so some children will be forced to go to school hungry. Therefore, the government of Zimbabwe should consider providing school meals to learners. This will not be easy since the government of Zimbabwe is already experiencing huge financial problems in the delivery of social services.*

On the other hand, teachers identified several measures that could form part of the integration of children into the new Zimbabwean education system. The following were foregrounded:

Special classes for incoming children, weekend classes, double session classes, provision of counselling services to incoming students and workshops for school-teachers to enable them to deal with diversity. One teacher gave insightful views:

Teacher 3: *All initiatives to integrate return migrant students have huge cost*

implications to the school, government and community. At government level we do not expect to get much financial support since the government is already struggling to support existing numbers of learners in schools. Many schools are also in impoverished societies where parents are not able to raise other revenue streams to support the learning of their children.

Teacher 1: *The issue of special language classes will need to be given top priority since learners coming from South Africa are exposed to different languages most of which are not taught or spoken in Zimbabwean schools. So how to manage the language problem of different children coming from different provinces in South Africa will be an enormous task for schools, government and the communities.*

Clearly both parents and teachers agreed that strategies for reintegrating children will be hampered by the shortage of financial resources in Zimbabwean schools particularly those located in low socio-economic areas.

Discussion

From the findings, it is clear that the forced return migration to Zimbabwe will have huge implications in terms of children's learning and their psychosocial well-being. It is clear that the unplanned return will have huge cost implications to the Zimbabwean government which is currently experiencing challenges in financing the current school enrolments, infrastructure and teachers' salaries. The unprecedented numbers of all those students who will be forced to return to Zimbabwe will have huge impact on staffing considerations, resources, quality of learning and quality of life for both students and teachers. The existing primary schools in Zimbabwe, full as they are with current enrolments, are also characterised by massive shortages of basic education facilities and resources and may not be able to contend with the sudden influx of massive numbers that will be returning from South Africa (Nyakabawu, 2022). Therefore, returning parents with younger or school-age children get concerned about the availability of school places and pre-schools and most importantly whether schools have support measures to integrate returnee children. This

situation may result in many children of school going age staying at home, having failed to secure places for learning which may give rise to stress, despondency and dejection.

Children of migrant parents who were born outside Zimbabwe are likely to face a mammoth task in trying to adjust to the Zimbabwean educational environment which will be very alien to them in terms of almost every dimension. Included under these are language and culture which will be very different and thus standing in the way of the children's adjustment and adaptation. Similar sentiments were raised by parents who were interviewed about factors that hinder the integration of their returning children in the Latvian school system. Parents cited the following: lack of proficiency in the Latvian language; teachers' attitude towards returnee children; curriculum content differences and attitude of classmates to newcomers. Similarly, Agadjaman (2013) interviewed returnee parents on challenges faced by their children when integrating in a new school. Central to the parents' responses was the issue of different assessment cultures and different atmospheres in the new school including the behaviour of children in the class. Zimbabwean teachers who were interviewed telephonically about the envisaged challenges of forced return on children's learning also alluded to the problems raised in the above. Vantoni (2016) makes a cogent observation that returning migrants may isolate themselves out of shame and guilt, hampering their ability to rebuild social networks. This may be exacerbated by the undercurrent practice of teasing and alienation that manifests itself in several schools in Zimbabwe.

This situation is likely to result in returning children not making meaningful progress in their learning or even dropping out. This view is consistent with Grosa and King (2022) who cited underachievement and dropping out as the likely consequence experienced by returning children who struggle to integrate into the Zimbabwean schools. Similar findings were made in a study conducted by Medina and Menjivar (2015) on Mexican American children returning to Mexico. The study revealed several challenges that were faced by returnee children, which problems include the challenge of

integrating into Mexican schools and thus leading to academic underachievement and high dropout rates.

The huge cultural differences between the Zimbabwean and South African society and associated school cultures implies that returning children would be treated as outsiders by their counterparts from Zimbabwe. As noted in the interviews, returning children from South Africa were exposed to different languages in accordance with the regional languages predominant in the areas they had settled. This situation poses major problems as all these languages are not spoken nor taught in Zimbabwean schools. This will give rise to feelings of animosity, distrust and segregation which makes integration, inclusive engagement and meaningful relationships between returnees and other children difficult. To this end, Lulle (2017) makes a cogent observation that to the extent that they have different life experiences and cultural attributes, returnee children tend to be regarded as partial outsiders. Gherghina et al., (2020) extend on this view by remarking that returnee children are likely to be bullied due to the various traits that differentiate them from others such as accent, lack of proficiency in the local languages, different mannerisms, interests and cultural norms. Grosa and King (2022) assert that children of migrant parents experience a process of 'double othering' in the host country (South Africa in this case) and in their parental homeland (Zimbabwe) upon their return. Under these conditions, returnee children are likely going to experience numerous psychosocial challenges in their learning and general wellbeing.

A sense of belonging is critical for the well-being of children of school going age and yet many children of migrant parents were born in the host countries outside their home countries, which impedes the sense of belonging upon their return. Thus, returnee children face a huge risk of experiencing isolation and marginalisation when they return to schools in their countries of origin. This view aligns with Ndreka (2019) observation that children with no experience in the culture of their homeland face problems in adjusting to their new location and managing issues of identity and belonging. Therefore, the forced return migration of Zimbabwean nationals is likely going to give

rise to an educational, social and psychological crises of epic proportions.

The structural differences that characterises the South African and the Zimbabwean education system at both primary and high school level acts as an enormous constraint that militates against successful integration of returnee learners. Such a problem will not only be a challenge to learners but also to teachers and school leaders who in most cases would not have received sufficient training in dealing with a problem of this nature.

Returning students are likely to experience a major hurdle to get admission to Zimbabwean Universities based on their matric qualifications which are substantively different from the Zimbabwean A-Level qualification. The critical issue is that if they are not admitted based on their matric qualifications, then the returning migrants may be forced to repeat or starting all over from form five or form six so that they acquire the requisite qualifications for admission to Zimbabwean universities. This measure will not only be costly in terms of financing the studies but also in relation to the time that is expended by the student studying. This, in practice, means that students will take long to complete schooling, and this may give rise to stress and anxiety. This is particularly so in the Zimbabwean environment, where unemployment is believed to be at an all-time high of 70% and youth anxiety and stress cannot be ruled out.

The unprecedented number of students who would join the Zimbabwean primary school system upon return from South Africa might necessitate that schools adopt a practice known as double seasoning or hot seating in order to provide access of education to the increased student population (Lois and Katai, 2013; Singadi., Gooronga., Gatahwi., and Mutangwira, 2014). Hot-sitting or double sessioning schooling, as it is called in other contexts, is a practice where the school provides education to different sessions (morning and afternoon) of each school day (Bray, 2008). This means that in any particular grade, some students learn in the morning and make way for another group of students which comes to school in the afternoon to use the same classroom

and the few available resources and facilities (Singadi et al., 2014). It is a strategy of stretching or sharing the available limited resources that is adopted when the demand for education outstrips the supply (Ndlovu, 2012). In this case the explosion in the student numbers that will result from returning students from South Africa, will cause an unprecedented demand for access to primary school education and may have huge implications in terms of the quality and the process of the educational provisioning.

Conclusion

Return migration is a complex phenomenon that is an essential component of migration. While much has been studied and published on return migration, not much has been done in terms of exploring the impact of return migration on children's learning and psycho-social health. Children have often been left out in migration and return migration discourses and yet they are the major victims of migration decisions.

The decision by the South African government not to renew the ZEP permits has caused a mix of fury and despondency as most Zimbabwean migrants would be repatriated against their will. This study has established the potentially disruptive nature of the intended unplanned return migration on the learning and psychosocial well-being of the children. However, more research is needed to help provide guidance on strategies of integrating return migrants with reference to children of school-going age. This forced return would be unprecedented and would have far reaching implications in terms of the sustainability of children's learning as well as their overall psychosocial well-being in the home country. This paper sought to explore this issue and seeks to conclude that the forced return of Zimbabwean nationals from South Africa will not only affect the lives and well fare of returnees but also society in general.

Limitations of the study

The major limitation of this study was that as a case study its delimitation was confined to a small and context specific population. As a result, the findings cannot be generalised across different contexts. This study focuses on the

impact of return migration on children's learning and psychosocial well being. Naturally, it would be good to involve the children in this study but because of financial, time and practical limitations, this was not possible. Therefore future studies may explore this theme but involving the learners themselves.

Recommendations

Arising from the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to inform policy and practice:

Non-governmental and religious organisations should initiate programmes at school and community level to integrate return migrant children in the different levels of the education system.

The Zimbabwean government should attach social workers at schools or at district offices who are charged with the responsibility of assisting in the integration of returnee children.

Teachers need capacity development in terms of how to handle children from different educational and social backgrounds and contexts. This could take the form of workshops or conferences where strategies of managing children from different cultural and social backgrounds are shared.

Returning parents with children of school going age need to form an association so that they stay connected and assist each other in terms of how they can contribute in the integration of their children into a new educational environment.

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