



# Sustainable learning for refugee children in South African primary schools: A theoretical approach

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**Background:** The advent of democracy in South Africa brought about many changes in the education system. Policies and frameworks that guide the embracement of refugee children were formulated and later implemented. However, there are ongoing challenges experienced by this group and the incidents of poor access and quality of provision experienced by a larger population of refugee children, calls for urgent redress.

**Aim:** This is a theoretical article that examines and analyses the education access, school integration and participation of refugee children.

**Setting:** Focusing on refugee children in a primary school in South Africa.

**Method:** Empirical study articles and reviews carried out on the education and resettlement of refugee children in their host countries between 2005 till date were randomly selected for inclusion in our analysis. Our intention was to understand how the education for refugees is generally conceptualised and the extent to which their lived experiences are captured.

**Result:** Using Gibson's theory of affordances as a lens, this article analyses the relationship between the new school environment and refugee children and evaluates the possibilities of sustainable learning for all.

**Conclusion:** We argue for an expansive access, including social and academic support interventions that are balanced in terms of promoting the individual child's abilities and needs for optimal development.

**Keywords:** refugee children; sustainable learning; school access; social integration; school participation.

## Introduction

Equity and quality in education for all children are central to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4. Universal quality education constitutes an independent goal having seven outcome targets: (1) Universal primary and secondary education, (2) early childhood development and universal pre-primary education, (3) equal success to technical or vocational and higher education, (4) relevant skills for decent work, (5) gender equality and inclusion, (6) universal youth literacy, (7) education for sustainable development and global citizenship). This will be implemented through effective learning environments, scholarships and supply of quality teachers.<sup>1</sup> These goals are also linked to every other aspect of the agenda with a specific mention in five other major goals, which include: health and well-being, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, responsible consumption and production and climate change mitigation.<sup>2</sup> Refugee and asylum-seeking children in their various countries of residence require equal and quality education opportunities if the SDG for 2030 is to be achieved.

This article provides an analysis and critique of debates and studies around the educational access, school integration and participation of refugee children in the primary school life in South Africa. Using the affordance theory as the theoretical underpinning for this article, I posit that the presence and the quality of available resources in a given environment interact with the abilities of the individual, which in-turn influences the nature and quality of such person's interaction and overall development in the same environment. Thus, when the conditions of the environment are favourable to the refugee children, their social and academic integration into the school is enhanced. This in turn will influence their school participation including their overall success.

In this article, the concept of access and quality education was engaged, focusing on refugee children in the South African public primary schools. To fully understand this, elements from Chemero's affordance framework were explored. As pointed out by Chemero,<sup>3</sup> affordances

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constitute the interaction between the abilities of the organisms and the attributes of the environment that the organisms spend time and lives in. The theoretical framework and its applicability to the present discourse will be discussed later in this article.

The incidences of forcibly displaced persons across the globe have resulted in the influx of asylum seekers and refugee population across borders around the world. Internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees are on the verge of the society. South Africa constitutes one of the countries accepting a high number of refugees on a daily basis, particularly refugees from the neighbouring South African countries.<sup>4</sup> Although it was observed in the report by the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR), 2018 that the actual number of refugees and asylum seekers in the country as at mid-2018 cannot be easily determined because of a number of concerns raised by different stakeholders. These concerns relate to the methods of data gathering adopted by the Department of Home Affairs and the uniqueness of South Africa's 'non-encampment' policy which meant that refugees in South Africa are allowed to settle in any part of the country provided they have the right documentations and means of sustenance. Refugee children constitute most of this group.

## Defining refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees are migrants whose movement is not based on improving their situation and quality of life, rather, it is premised on survival and safeguarding their lives. Tadesse, Hoot<sup>5</sup> argued that 'refugees are forced to leave their homelands, often suddenly, as a result of threats to their personal safety'. Rwamatwara<sup>6</sup> and Essomba,<sup>7</sup> added that refugees are forced migrants who because of threats inflicted on their physical well-being in their country of residence resulting from social and economic conflict move to another country, to afford themselves, physical security and general well-being. Thus, they arrive at the host countries with no prior preparation in place. On their arrival, they often settle down in camps or on the streets because of the absence of prior arrangement for shelter, job and support for their family, which include finding a suitable school for their children.<sup>5</sup> The refugee families also struggle with problems of adjusting to their new environment and learning the local language for effective social integration.<sup>8,9</sup>

Asylum seekers, on the other hand, refer to anyone who because of a reason or the other leaves his or her country of nationality to seek a formal application for asylum in another country for reasons of insecurity and threats to their lives and peaceful coexistence.<sup>10,11</sup> It is important to note that most refugees get asylum seekers' status before their refugee documentation is finalised.<sup>12,13</sup> Similarly, Tyrer and Fazel,<sup>14</sup> pointed out that asylum seekers are those who are waiting for the finalisation of their refugee status application. According to the<sup>15</sup> asylum seekers do not have a constitutional right to the provisions enshrined in the refugee conventions

of 1951 and its 1967 protocol, until they are granted a refugee permit. As noticed here, children constitute many of these groups. To cover for the loss and challenges encountered by the refugee children population before, during and after arriving in the host country, it is imperative that an enabling and sensitive environment is made available with particular focus on their education, health and welfare for optimal realisation of the SDGs by 2030.

Regardless of who accompany the refugee or the asylum seeking children during their migration to the host country, they are continuously exposed to a number of stress and multirisk factors including trauma.<sup>8</sup> As soon as they arrive in the host country, they are faced with challenges accessing different services including quality education. The situation faced by the refugee population daily is contradictory to the provisions of the international framework protecting the rights of all children irrespective of their social, economic and racial status. For example, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*<sup>4,16</sup> guarantees all children's rights to safety and education as indicated in Articles 28 and 29 of the document.

As indicated in the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) 1989, supporting and educating refugee children come with a lot of benefits, not just to the child but also to his or her family and the larger society. Thus, promoting educational access and quality provision for refugee children in their host country gives them a head start and assists them to get ready for school, like every other child.<sup>13</sup>

## Theoretical framework

Gibson's theory of affordances underpins this review.<sup>17</sup> In particular, Chemero's<sup>3</sup> reconceptualisation of the theory was explored for the review. It sees 'affordances as the relations between the abilities of organisms and features of the environment' in this case, the ability of the learner in the new environment. Here, the article utilises the theory to understand the interrelatedness between the abilities of the organism (refugee children) and the features of the environment (their host country and the public primary schools). The article seeks to understand those factors in the refugee children's immediate environment that determine and provide access to a positive and a meaningful learning environment. Gibson<sup>17</sup> stressed that what is perceived by the organism and the actions that follow it are dependent on one another. He further explains that, for the organism to adjust to and appreciate what the environment offers, it must first perceive, value and associate some meaning to its affording qualities.<sup>18</sup> According to Gibson's 1986 version of the affordance theory, it is important that both the organism and the environment where the organisms live are complementary because of its objectivity and physical nature of affordance.<sup>19</sup> Hence, this article is premised on the understanding that for equal access and quality education and experience for refugee and asylum-seeking children in South Africa, factors such as inclusive policies, intervention programmes in schools, training and re-training of teachers, stakeholder's collaboration, receptive

attitudes and re-orientation of local nationals, review of school policies and departmental curriculum in a sensitive atmosphere must be ensured.

## Towards a sustainable learning for refugee children

As argued throughout this article, sustainable learning and development, in all schools, for all children irrespective of their social, ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds is a requisite for a sustainable economy. Considering the fourth goal of the SDGs for Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) and basic primary education, which supports inclusion and equal quality of education that promotes a lifelong learning experience for all children, it becomes imperative that no child is left out of such life opportunity. Ensuring and implementing this sustainable development become the responsibility of all stakeholders in the field. The second outcome of educational goals for SDGs that are targeted towards universal pre-primary and basic primary education for all children regardless of their socio-economic background and/or disability must be protected. To ensure this, all children are expected to partake in at least 1 year of free and compulsory pre-primary education before the formal schooling. This is to be steered by capable and qualified educators.

In addition, a safe and child-friendly teaching and learning environment are to be provided to all children for a successful learning and holistic development. Such an environment according to the education developmental goal is expected to provide support, care and stimulation to all children without any barrier to unlocking their innate potential.<sup>20</sup> As observed by UNHCR,<sup>16</sup> education for displaced persons, either internally or otherwise, is a major priority for all the concerned authorities. Children in this category deserve an equal standard of education as other children, to enable them to develop the necessary skills and knowledge they need to function well in later education and future. The challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in their various host countries call for urgent redress. Research evidence in the United States suggests that refugee and immigrant children tend to have a lower chance of participating in early education programmes when compared with children from United States-born parents. South Africa is no exception.

As Dryden-Peterson<sup>16</sup> pointed out, refugee children experience a host of barriers accessing the education programmes in their countries of residence. These barriers may include but are not limited to children's refugee status in the host country, language barrier and their socio-economic status. Often, before their documentation is finalised and their permit granted, access to services such as health, social welfare and education for refugee children has been denied. Mweni<sup>11</sup> observed that the inability of refugee children in South Africa to enjoy their constitutional right as enshrined in both the national and international frameworks: *Refugee Act*, No 130 of 1998 of the South African Government and The 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR) is an issue of concern.<sup>21,22</sup> He argued that children of refugees are denied

access to basic and quality education because of issues related to school fees, documentations, language and unfair treatment through xenophobic attacks. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Access to primary education for refugee children in South Africa

Studies internationally and nationally are focusing on understanding the conditions of refugee children in relation to their educational access and resettlement in their various host countries. The UNHCR made it clear that the refugee population across the world are continually faced with a host of challenges accessing different services in their countries of residence.<sup>4,16</sup> For example, Koehler,<sup>23</sup> observed that the:

EU [*European Union*] Member States have been facing challenges in providing decent opportunities in education for newly arrived refugees and integrating them into the mainstream education. According to him, these challenges have intensified since 2015 with the arrival of larger numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. (p. 4)

Another study in the United States suggests that Syrian refugee children in Germany and Lebanon were faced with a number of challenges related to coping and integrating effectively into the educational system of their host countries.<sup>24</sup>

In South Africa, several complex and unexplained barriers often stand in the way of asylum seekers and refugee family's access to basic amenities, such as health, social welfare and education. As observed in the work of Palmary,<sup>25</sup> the South African law is silent on whether or not the asylum seeker awaiting their refugee status permit has a right to these services. This predisposes them to such hardships as taking up jobs and settling in places that are far below economic living standard. Consequently, the refugee population in South Africa is exposed to conditions that are risky to their life and their overall stay in the country.<sup>13,26</sup> In spite of the mandates of the international conventions to which South Africa is signatory, refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa still face long waits and refusal of permits on a daily basis.<sup>27</sup>

To elaborate on this, Meda<sup>28</sup> observed that the inability of refugee and asylum seeking parents to secure and register their preschool-aged children in school was because of delay in their documentation. These delays also affect the young refugee children and their attendance in school. Sibanda and Vally<sup>29</sup> added that the education rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa are suffering at the hands of the public-school managements, who because of one reason or the other do not understand and/or implement the policy around refugee children's school access and attendance.

Other issues such as xenophobic attacks and undue discrimination and harm inflicted on the refugee and asylum-seeking families cannot be overemphasised. For example, Meda<sup>28</sup> pointed out that the present state of affairs

with foreign nationals in South Africa is believed to be heightened as a result of the limited amenities, which citizens and foreign nationals compete for. To support these findings, Bourgonje<sup>30</sup> argued that refugees and asylum-seeking children in some of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Australia, Sweden, Spain and the United Kingdom) still face a lot of obstacles in school enrolment because of the high rates of prejudice, xenophobia and the school's inability to make a connection to the children's past school experience.

Furthermore, Perumal<sup>31</sup> observed that whilst investigating the experience of refugee children's attending a bridging programme in a centre at Johannesburg, the refugee children who participated in the intervention programme were given the opportunity to access education when they were denied access to the South African public schools because of lack of documentation needed for admission into public schools. Accessing basic rights by refugee families and their children appears very difficult.<sup>32</sup> In particular, access to social, welfare and health services, adequate programming for assisting unaccompanied children, delays and irregularities around status determination and securing the actual permit remain difficult.<sup>11,13</sup>

Although the South African government has demonstrated a deep-rooted effort towards resettling refugee families and their children to settle into their new environment through the different programmes on ground on their arrival in the country. For example, the continual assistance in providing support through monthly grants for those whose papers are up to date cannot be over-emphasised. Moreover, South Africa's non-encampment policy also meant that both refugee and asylum-seeking families are given the opportunity to stay in any part of the country provided they have the right permits. Different non-governmental organisations have also been supportive in terms of providing support and awareness for refugee families and their children in South Africa. For example, an organisation called the People Against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP) that fights for the rights of the asylum seekers, refugee and migrants in South Africa observed that the *South African School Act* and the *United Nations Convention on the rights of a Child* makes provision for the education of all children within the ages of 5 and 15 years to attend school irrespective of the socio-economic and racial background. As outlined in the framework, no learner must be exempted from a state school on the ground of non-payment of registration and school fees, poor language proficiency, race, and religion, ethnic national and social economic background.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of this provision and recognition of the legal frameworks by all the concerned authorities, many refugee and asylum-seeking families still find it difficult to secure admission for their children in the public primary schools.<sup>13,34</sup> The recent and ongoing treatment of refugees reported in schools calls for concern. For instance, the Cape Town

incidence where over 40 children between the ages of 5 and 15 years were denied admission to the Cape Town public schools is a pointer to the realities facing the refugee population on a daily basis.<sup>35</sup> The role of the South African government in receiving refugees from different parts of the world and understanding and protecting their constitutional rights is crucial. The fact that these families have been allowed to resettle in the country meant that their constitutional rights must be protected. Access to social welfare and healthcare services including pre-primary and primary school education has to be ensured.<sup>2,20</sup>

## Towards effective integration of refugee children in primary schools

Firstly, this study is premised on the understanding that children's participation and success in school are directly related to the nature and quality of their academic and social integration in the school. As expounded by,<sup>36,37</sup> students' effective integration into the school system is enhanced through their social and academic interaction with others and materials through the different activities they engage and participate in, in the school. The quality and robustness of such activity and interaction are largely dependent on the availability of stimulating learning and play materials that scaffolds appropriate potentials and skills in children for optimal development. Thus, Tinto posited that when students are socially integrated into the life of the institution, their academic integration is supported and their performance is improved.<sup>38,39</sup> Alternatively, inadequate academic integration into the life of the school will negatively impact their social integration and overall success.<sup>36</sup>

To support the given notion, Metz<sup>40</sup> observed that factors such as individual interaction with significant others (learners and teachers) the school management, participation in the academic work and students' involvement in extra-curricular activities in the school system positively impact student's overall integration into the school system. We argue that the quality of education children experience in the early years of schooling directly impacts how well children perform and thrive in subsequent years in school and in higher education. Findings from studies conducted in the South African contexts indicated that refugee children in the primary school are exposed to varied experiences and support, which promotes their integration and participation in school.<sup>13,31,41,42</sup>

As pointed out by Morland and Levine,<sup>43</sup> the quality of early education the refugee children are exposed to should benefit and support their health, improve their language proficiency and acquisition of maths and reading skills. Thus, effective integration and education of refugee children in primary school and early education programmes and availability of a conducive and learner-sensitive learning environment are essential for optimal development and positive educational and health outcomes.

## Discussion

The main thrust of this article was to examine and analyse the education access, school integration and participation of refugee children, focusing on refugee children in the primary school in South Africa. This was achieved by randomly picking empirical studies and reviews performed on the education of refugee children in their host countries between 2005 and till date. Our intention was to understand how the education for refugees is generally conceptualised and the extent to which their lived experiences are captured.

To achieve this, insight was drawn from the theory of affordances. In Chemero's reconceptualisation of affordance, he noticed that affordances are the interactions between the abilities of organisms and some distinctive attributes of the environment where the organism lives. The theory was used to understand the interrelatedness between the abilities of the observed organisms (in this case, refugee children) and the features of the environment (host country and the public primary schools). In particular, the article seeks to examine those factors in the refugee children's immediate environment, which supports their school's access and their success therein.

The findings from the analysis of different research articles suggest that most of the empirical work included in the analysis have their focus on refugee children's right to education, school practises, school adjustment and achievement<sup>11,12,28,31,41</sup> and barriers to educational access to refugee.<sup>13,26,44,45</sup> Based on these findings, it was noticed that studies are limited to refugee children's school integration and participation in the primary school life, such as the refugee children in South Africa. This article therefore proposes a model that is holistic in its approach. This is important for the refugee population in South Africa and beyond if the SDG 4 is to be achieved by 2030. The suggested model put into consideration the factors that may enhance equal access and quality education and support system that will promote effective integration and participation of refugee children in school and beyond. This is believed to have the potential of impacting refugee children's school success, including other children who may require educational support.

In the proposed model, elements from the social and academic integration frameworks of Tinto<sup>36</sup> and Chemero's Affordance Model of 2003<sup>3</sup> were incorporated. This includes inclusive policies that cater for refugee children's academic and social needs in school and beyond, intervention programmes in schools, training and re-training of teachers to assist refugee children integrate effectively in public schools, stakeholder's collaboration, home-school collaboration, receptive attitudes from local nationals, continuous review of school policies and departmental curriculum to meet the needs of refugee population. It is understood that the model may be a bit cumbersome and difficult to implement in empirical studies. Based on this understanding, a careful review of the suggested model by scholars, stakeholders and policymakers becomes eminent.

Furthermore, findings from the analysis also suggest that the South African government welcomes refugee families including unaccompanied children into the country, without imposing a clause with regard to where to stay in the country. It was also noticed that the government made provision for monthly grants to assist refugees who are unemployed to sustain their family during their stay in the country. The steps and initiatives taken by some school's management to create an enabling and inclusive learning environment through the implementation of intervention programmes for refugee children to thrive in the primary schools are observed. However, what we see as missing in the provision of access and assisting refugee children to integrate effectively into the public school relates to the inability of some schools to be inclusive in their approach, clauses in admission policies in different schools, lack of implementation and supervision of the content of both the international and national legal frameworks, which might support refugee children's effective integration and participation in school.

Thus, this study argues that, for refugee children to adequately integrate into the social and academic life of the formal school and thrive therein in their different host countries, it is important that a social system that is well structured, well equipped, conducive and encourages the full participation of all learners is put in place in the formal school for optimal realisation of learning and developmental outcomes.

## Conclusion

In summary, research evidence has established the importance of early school attendance as a driving force for children's participation and academic achievement in school. Children from refugee background should not be excluded from this lifelong opportunity. Thus, this research argues that equal access and quality early education and attendance for all children are a sure means of unlocking issues around school access and closing the school participation and achievement gap between children from resource-poor contexts, including those from refugee backgrounds and their peers.<sup>13</sup> This will require a joint effort from stakeholders and individuals involved, including all citizenry.

Thus, we argue for an expansive access, including social and academic support interventions that are balanced in terms of promoting individual child's abilities and needs for optimal development. This might open new opportunities and expand the provision of support and guarantee success for this population in school and beyond. It is envisaged that the different stages of implementation might be faced with challenges, it is believed that a stringent and well-monitored process might lead to a successful adaptation and resettlement of the refugee population in their various countries of residence. Arguing from equity and quality of services point of view, it becomes necessary that children from culturally and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (such as refugees) be given equal opportunity and support needed to access basic education and other services, which will lead to the actualisation of the 2030 SDGs.

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### Author's contributions

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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