

# IT'S COMPLEX!

Working with Students of Refugee Backgrounds  
and their Families in New South Wales Public Schools



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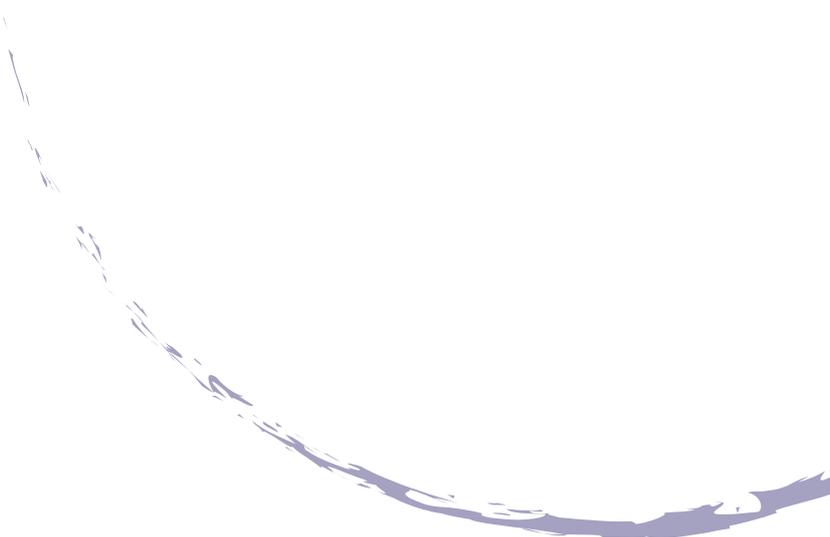
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Most importantly, we would like to thank indeed, honour students of refugee backgrounds and their families; not just those that have contributed to this research, but to all those who have made the journey to Australia, and made it a better place for it. This study is about the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds, but it is they who are teaching us. This report is dedicated to them.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was undertaken for the NSW Teachers Federation as part of their centenary year. It involved research into the needs of students of refugee backgrounds and their families and how best to support teachers in NSW public schools in meeting these needs.

The research included interviews and focus groups with executive staff and teachers, students with and without refugee backgrounds and the parents or carers of students of refugee backgrounds in 10 public schools. These schools included primary schools, high schools and Intensive English Centres (IECs) in Sydney and regional locations in NSW, with high and low populations of students of refugee backgrounds and varying numbers of students with a language background other than English (LBOTE) among their broader populations.

The study also involved observations in classrooms, playgrounds and school community events. In addition to school data, interviews were also held with relevant personnel in key organisations.

The study examined the challenges faced by school communities as a result of their increasing number of students of refugee backgrounds. It looked at the

educational and broader needs of these students, the programs in place to support them within schools, the links between educational experiences and other aspects of the settlement process and the social contexts in which settlement occurs, the consequences for teacher workloads and their professional capacities, and a range of other issues.

## Key findings

The needs of students of refugee backgrounds are not simply the pragmatic requirements of educational performance, but must address their complex linguistic, social, cultural, psychological and economic needs.

Schools are much more than educational institutions. While this has always been the case, with increasing and diversifying refugee intakes they have become more complex sites of refugee and community support, with greater expectations and challenges.

Schools are grappling with a range of issues that result from these greater expectations: teacher workload, professional learning, funding issues, interagency coordination and community liaison.

There are uneven levels of expertise and support across schools, both by region and by type, and related to school and community contexts, and individual teachers' experiences. There are schools, such as IECs, that are set up well to meet these challenges, developing significant banks of expertise and resources, and there are schools that, by dint of their location and demographics, are not well set up or well funded.

Many teachers are providing additional support beyond the classroom in terms of arranging homework clubs, extra work, support services, community liaison, etc, creating increased and intensified workloads that have stressful consequences for work-life balance and some teachers' mental health.

Many teachers are providing this extra support but with varying degrees of experience and expertise. Many do not have EAL/D qualifications, for example, exacerbating the stressful circumstances in which they are working. Many are also finding themselves in classrooms with increasingly complex student populations, posing challenges for classroom teaching.

There are very uneven levels of understanding in schools — among teachers, non-refugee students and the wider community — of the complex experiences and challenges faced by students of refugee backgrounds.

Staff in schools often struggle to “get the right balance” between addressing the pastoral, the academic and the socio-cultural needs of students of refugee backgrounds.

Students of refugee backgrounds, as a consequence, have very varied educational experiences: some are settling well and some are not “fitting in”. While most value the efforts undertaken at their schools, as do their parents, many are also suffering from a lack of support. These students are also faced with the dilemma of in/visibility:

they often stand out — for various reasons — but their needs are often “invisible” and they fall through cracks in the system.

Many students recount the enormous challenges of English language and literacy acquisition and often feel underprepared for their educational experiences.

Many students continue to experience enormous problems in the transition from IECs to high school despite this being well documented in previous research.

Many students of refugee backgrounds report the ongoing incidence of racism though this is not always acknowledged by some staff within schools.

Schools are continuing to struggle with developing and sustaining productive relations with parents of refugee backgrounds and the wider community.

The work of refugee support leaders has become increasingly important in many schools and their broader communities, but these positions have a limited term. Refugee support leaders have also taken up roles in the wake of the loss of the NSW Department of Education Multicultural Education/EAL/D consultants that occurred in 2012, a loss that has been detrimental for many schools.

While much work has been done to address issues around the coordination of governmental and non-governmental agencies in the area of refugee settlement, this has not yet been embedded in daily practice in schools and this enhances the instability of life for students of refugee backgrounds and their families.



# INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the total number of refugees worldwide was 25.4 million (UNHCR, 2018). This number has risen dramatically due to the increasing number and intensity of conflicts in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, forcing many to flee their homelands and seek safety elsewhere. Many of these refugees are under 18 years of age, and many are unaccompanied minors. While Australia's proportion of this number is relatively low (see chapter 1), thousands of young refugees (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017) enter Australia each year on humanitarian visas and face the daunting prospect of beginning school in their newfound home with limited or no English, limited or no literacy in their first language, disrupted or no previous schooling, and the scars of trauma resulting from the experiences of war, the death of loved ones, poverty and protracted periods of displacement in refugee camps and/or one or more countries of transit (Yak, 2016). Moreover, once settled, many may be under pressure to earn an income or to help other members of their family, affecting their attendance and progress at school (Refugee Council of Australia, 2016). In addition to this, issues around gender, faith and racism may affect their capacity to "fit in" (Yak, 2016). Current accounts don't always capture the complexities of the

refugee experience and, in particular, the challenging task of attaining an education (Uptin et al., 2016).

The NSW Department of Education now records that one in 100 students in NSW schools is a refugee. While many of these students are located in schools in metropolitan Sydney, in particular in the western and south-western suburbs, there is an increasing number settling in regional areas, posing considerable challenges for schools and their communities to ensure that these students' complex needs are met. Schools are often the first point of contact with Australian society for young refugees, and so how schools position and serve them has enormous consequences (Uptin et al., 2013). Better understanding of what these needs entail, current practice in supporting refugee students and whether there are gaps in educational provision, is urgently needed as is a greater knowledge of how teachers themselves are coping with these increasingly complex school populations.

Various community, government and non-government organisations have provided considerable assistance to schools, but a number of studies suggest not only that far more is needed (Sidhu et al., 2011; Block et al., 2014), but that further research is required to gauge refugee students'

experiences of schooling and whether current practice is addressing their needs and those of teachers (Ferfolja and Vickers, 2010). In their centenary year, the NSW Teachers Federation commissioned researchers at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University to undertake such a study to help fill this gap and to yield data to inform how they may best support teachers working in these complex environments. This report is a product of this research undertaken within the Mapping the Educational Experiences of Refugee Students (MEERS) project, which sought to attain a snapshot of the experiences of refugee students in NSW schools and the issues facing teachers and broader school communities as they work together to ensure the best educational opportunities for these students. The report's title, *It's Complex! Working with Students of Refugee Backgrounds and their Families in New South Wales Public Schools*, reflects not only the complex needs of refugee students and their families but the inherent complexity of meeting these needs often within schools already grappling with the challenges of socio-economic disadvantage, increasing cultural and linguistic diversity and students with physical and intellectual disabilities (Watkins, 2011). Meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds is undertaken alongside those of other students making the task for teachers a complex one indeed. This report attempts to capture this complexity, highlighting examples of good practice and considering where improvements could be made to support teachers in NSW schools to achieve the best possible outcomes for students of refugee backgrounds.

## Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach drawing on various methods: interviews, focus groups and observations. The value of qualitative research is that it can provide

rich and deep data that capture the lived experiences of participants offering nuanced accounts that are more specific to the situation than quantitative research. The project cast a wide net ensuring the voices of various actors were heard, those that could provide key insights into the “on the ground” experiences of students of refugee backgrounds and the issues that teachers and broader school communities face in meeting their needs. Within school communities this included the following:

- focus groups in each project school with students of refugee backgrounds
- interviews with students of refugee backgrounds in a selection of project schools
- focus groups in each project high school and primary school with students of non-refugee backgrounds
- focus groups with parents of students of refugee backgrounds in a selection of the project schools
- interviews with parents of students of refugee backgrounds in a selection of the project schools
- focus groups with teachers in each project school and EAL/D teachers where applicable
- interviews with principals and or deputies in each project school or focus groups with senior school executive.

These participants were not just drawn from schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds. The study also sought the perspectives of those in schools with limited numbers to ascertain the degree to which these contexts shape the capacity of refugee students to settle both socially and educationally, and whether schools can draw on the same kinds of resources (teacher expertise, local organisations, community support) as established centres of refugee education.

The study was also keen to explore the educational experiences of students of

refugee backgrounds from kindergarten to year 12 given the varying needs of primary and secondary school-aged students and the differences in the forms of support this entails. This is particularly the case regarding EAL/D provision with secondary school-aged students generally attending IECs for up to five terms before entering the mainstream compared with those in the primary years where EAL/D support is provided within the primary school itself. With increasing numbers of refugees settling in regional areas, the study also wanted to capture the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds in these contexts and how schools and teachers were faring in the face of these changing demographics.

While the project intended a broad mapping exercise, the time constraints of collecting, analysing and reporting on the data within the NSW Teachers Federation centenary year meant the sample of schools needed to be both diverse and contained. In light of this, the study chose to focus on 10 schools: four high schools, two IECs and four primary schools. These schools had varying enrolments of students of refugee backgrounds, some high and some very low, varying enrolments of LBOTE students, and were quite geographically dispersed, most being within the Sydney metropolitan area and others in regional locations. Further information regarding their location and particular demographics is not provided for ethical reasons discussed further below with the following pseudonyms employed in discussion of the data in chapters 2-7:

High Schools	IECs	Primary Schools
Harperville HS	Illington IEC	Pendlebury PS
Hopetoun HS	Ingleby IEC	Palgrave PS
Humbervale HS		Princeton PS
Hastings HS		Pulver PS

The project also sought the insights of key personnel within the NSW Department of Education. This included representatives from Learning and Wellbeing and Equity Programs together with a number of Refugee Support Leaders who, while based in schools, work across a number of sites providing assistance after the Federal Government's increased intake of refugees from Syria in 2016. Various non-government and community organisations also work closely with schools to support students of refugee backgrounds and their families. Representatives from the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), Settlement Services International (SSI), the Asylum Seeker Centre and the Assyrian Australian Association<sup>1</sup> were interviewed to gain their perspectives on current support for students of refugee backgrounds and their families and the extent to which factors such as health, wellbeing, housing, employment, English language proficiency and access to services associated with these, affect these students' education.

Data were sought on a range of topics:

- the language, literacy and learning needs of students of refugee backgrounds
- their progress and levels of academic achievement
- their social and emotional needs
- their aspirations
- their experiences of hardship including incidences of racism and bullying
- their sense of belonging to school and the broader community
- programs within and beyond schools that cater for their needs

<sup>1</sup> The Lebanese Muslim Association was also contacted for interview but there were difficulties arranging time to do this within the tight data collection timeframe of the study, as were interviews with representatives of many other community organisations who provide support to schools for students of refugee backgrounds and their families.

- the capacity of teachers and schools to address the needs of students of refugee backgrounds and their families
- teachers' levels of expertise around language, literacy and EAL/D pedagogy
- teachers' professional learning needs regarding students of refugee backgrounds
- levels of understanding within school communities about the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds
- levels of engagement with schools by parents and carers of students of refugee backgrounds
- the reception within schools and their broader communities to students of refugee backgrounds and their families
- schools' engagement with external organisations that assist students of refugee backgrounds and their families

- the role of the NSW Teachers Federation in supporting teachers to better meet the needs of students of refugee backgrounds.

The interviews and focus groups that were conducted to collect this data offered insights into the successes and challenges of refugee education from the perspective of this diverse range of participants and located these in relation to broader narratives and contexts. The focus groups also allowed participants to enter into conversations with their peers and the researchers to think collectively about the issues that students of refugee backgrounds and their families face, together with those confronting schools and teachers who are keen to assist them achieve their educational goals. In the focus groups with primary school students we used a drawing activity, where students could express their likes and dislikes in pictorial form in a booklet; but this was primarily intended to reduce the initial focus on talk and to facilitate students' comments

**Table 1. Summary of data sets and type and number of participants**

Type of interview and focus group participants	Number of participants
Students of refugee backgrounds	57
Students of non-refugee backgrounds	43
Parents of students of refugee backgrounds	28
Teachers including classroom and EAL/D	60
School executive	18
Refugee support leaders	3
Representatives of government, non-government and community organisations	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>221</b>
Type of observation	Number of observations
Classroom lessons	19
Playgrounds	20
School-based community events	2
Refugee support network meetings	2
Refugee youth group	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

as they described what they had drawn. The focus groups and some interviews with students of refugee backgrounds and their parents and/or carers also involved the presence of an interpreter.

The observations that were conducted occurred:

- in playgrounds before and after school
- in classrooms
- at school-based community events, e.g. a School's Welcome Day, a weekly parent afternoon tea
- at refugee support network meetings
- at a youth group for students of refugee backgrounds.

This data is drawn on sparingly in this report. Its chief purpose was to allow the researchers to immerse themselves within the field to gain some insight, over a short period of time, into the students of refugee backgrounds' experiences of schooling and a deeper understanding of their school communities.

## Ethics

Ethics approval to conduct the research was obtained from both Western Sydney University (Approval Number H12522) and the NSW Department of Education (SERAP Approval Number 2017656). As indicated, pseudonyms have been used for each school with no specific location or demographic information provided to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

The study's participants are also de-identified for the same reasons, all of whom were quite candid and forthcoming in their comments, keen to provide their perspectives on the issues canvassed in the research. Reference is made to the NSW Department of Education and, in some cases, the various organisations involved with schools though pseudonyms are used for their representatives.

In many instances, members of the research team were party to harrowing accounts of the experiences of the participants of refugee backgrounds prior to settling in Australia, though they were not sought. These are intentionally not detailed in the report but their disclosure gave us poignant insight into the incredible hardship and trauma that many faced, the ongoing effect of this on their lives and the significant challenges this poses for teachers of students of refugee backgrounds in schools.

## Terminology

The term "students of refugee backgrounds" is favoured in this report over "refugee students" for a number of reasons. Firstly, "students of refugee backgrounds" refers to a range of students not only those classified by the UNHCR as refugees. It includes students who have entered Australia on various refugee visas including:

- Refugee (subclass 200)
- In-Country Special Humanitarian (subclass 201)
- Emergency Rescue (subclass 203).

The term also includes those who can be termed "refugee-like" having been born in transit countries or recently after their parent/s arrival in Australia. It may also refer to children of asylum seekers on temporary visas whose refugee status is yet to be determined.

Many students of refugee backgrounds also eschew the term "refugee" as a form of identification given the negative representation of refugees within the media together with the fact that once settled in Australia many feel the term no longer applies. For stylistic purposes the term "refugee student" may be used at times

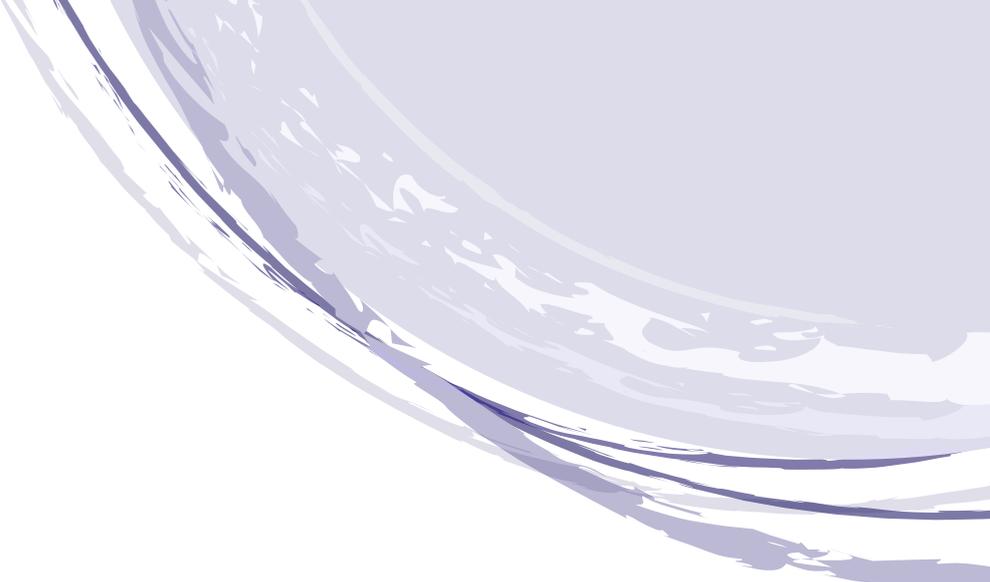
throughout the report but it is “students of refugee backgrounds” that is the preferred term.

## Chapter outline

As discussed, data for this report were gleaned from various sources: representatives of various government, non-government and community organisations, school executive, teachers, parents of students of refugee backgrounds, students of non-refugee backgrounds and, most importantly, the students of refugee backgrounds themselves. Each of these groups of participants had particular stories to tell and issues to raise. It is for this reason that a chapter is devoted to each of these actors foregrounding their perspectives

on the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds and the responses of schools to these increasingly complex populations.

The report begins with a review of recent research within the field of refugee education and the key issues it raises before then hearing from the participants within this study, saving those of the students of refugee backgrounds until last and allowing them the final say on the matter of their own education. The report concludes with recommendations based on the study’s findings, considering lessons learned and where improvements could be made in meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds in NSW schools, together with how teachers may be better supported as they perform this increasingly complex role.



# CHAPTER 1

## A review of the literature on the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds in Australia

### Facts and figures

While Australia has been a country of refugee re-settlement since the 1930s (Department of Home Affairs, 2018), with increasing conflicts worldwide, these numbers have risen dramatically in recent times. As mentioned in the Introduction, the total number of refugees worldwide in 2017 was 25.4 million, with 52 per cent of this number under 18 years of age (UNHCR, 2018). Australia's intake of refugees has been fairly stable over a number of years at a figure of around 13,730. In 2015-16, however, the Australian Government announced an additional

intake of 12,000 refugees displaced by the conflict in Syria and Iraq (see Table 2) bringing the total number of humanitarian visas to 17,540, including 3790 places for the additional intake of Syrian and Iraqi refugees (Department of Home Affairs, 2017a, p.1).

Another 8208 places for Syrian and Iraqi refugees were granted in 2016-17, taking the total number of humanitarian program visas granted during this period to 21,968 (Department of Home Affairs, 2018, p.7). Within the offshore sub-stream of the humanitarian program, which covers the majority of the refugee visa and

**Table 2. Humanitarian program outcomes by components 2013/14-2016/17**  
(source: Department of Home Affairs, 2018, p.7)

Category	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Refugee	6,484	5,985	8,267	9,653
SHP*	4,500	4,996	7,270	10,604
Onshore	2,752	2,750	2,003	1,711
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,736</b>	<b>13,731</b>	<b>17,540</b>	<b>21,968</b>

Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) visa<sup>1</sup> categories, the top five countries of birth for people obtaining this visa were Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Bhutan. The number of visas granted to people born in Iraq and Syria accounted for 67 per cent of the offshore stream (see Table 3). A significant proportion of these visas were granted to children and young people below the age of 18, representing 38 per cent of all offshore visas (Department of Home Affairs, 2017b, p.26). This large proportion of school-aged children and young people of refugee backgrounds coming to Australia has significant implications for schools.

As is evident in Table 4, in 2017, NSW received the largest number of settlers from the humanitarian program in Australia, with 39 per cent of all humanitarian visa settlers (Department of Social Services, 2018a) among which, over one third (36.4 per cent), were under 17 years of age.

As Table 5 shows, children under the age of 12, and those between 12 and 17 accounted

for 24.5 per cent and 11.9 per cent of the humanitarian visa settlers in NSW, respectively (Department of Social Services, 2018b). In December 2017, there were 10,413 students of refugee backgrounds enrolled in NSW public schools, an increase of 7.1 per cent from 2016 (Department of Education, 2018e).

In terms of geographic dispersal, the majority of humanitarian visa holders settled in western and south-western Sydney, in particular, in the local government areas (LGAs) of Fairfield, Liverpool, Blacktown and Parramatta. Regional areas have also received increasing numbers of humanitarian visa settlers and, as shown in Table 6, in 2017, Coffs Harbour and Wagga Wagga were among the local government areas with the highest number of humanitarian visa settlers (Department of Social Services, 2018c). This is in line with the recent proposed changes in refugee settlement policies by the federal government to settle new migrants outside capital cities (Fairfax Media, 2018). Such moves also have implications for schools

<sup>1</sup> Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) is a visa category that applicants are required to be supported by a sponsor who is an Australian citizen or PR eligible or New Zealand citizen or an organisation based in Australia (Department of Home Affairs, 2018)

**Table 3. Off-shore grants top 10 countries of birth (source: Department of Home Affairs, 2017, p.22)**

Country of Birth	Number of visas granted	Percentage of total
Iraq	7,478	36.9%
Syria	6,261	30.9%
Afghanistan	1,958	9.7%
Myanmar	1,747	8.6%
Bhutan	555	2.7%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	336	1.7%
Ethiopia	323	1.6%
Eritrea	323	1.6%
South Sudan	316	1.6%
Somalia	162	0.8%
Other	798	3.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20,257</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 4. Local Government Area of permanent humanitarian visa settlers between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2017 (Department of Social Services, 2018a)**

State of Residence	Humanitarian Visa	
	Number of settlers	% of total
New South Wales	6,541	39.0%
Victoria	5,439	32.5%
Queensland	2,098	12.5%
Western Australia	757	4.5%
South Australia	1,108	6.6%
Australian Capital Territory	219	1.3%
Not Recorded	0	0.0%
Northern Territory	57	0.3%
Tasmania	535	3.2%
External Territories	0	0.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,757</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 5. Age of permanent humanitarian visa settlers between 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2017 (Department of Social Services, 2018b)**

Age	Humanitarian visa	
	Number of settlers	% of total
0-5	1,712	10.2%
6-11	2,392	14.3%
12-15	1,359	8.1%
16-17	640	3.8%
18-24	2,007	12.0%
25-34	2,868	17.1%
35-44	2,343	14.0%
45-54	1,574	9.4%
55-64	1,028	6.1%
65+	834	5.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>16,757</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

**Table 6. Top 10 LGAs in NSW with the highest number of humanitarian visa settlers in 2017 (Department of Social Services, 2018c)**

Local government area	Number of settlers with humanitarian visas	Local government area	Number of settlers with humanitarian visas
Fairfield (C)	2,798	Holroyd (C)	238
Liverpool (C)	1,076	Bankstown (C)	190
Blacktown (C)	419	Wagga Wagga (C)	162
Parramatta (C)	323	Canterbury (C)	150
Coffs Harbour (C)	281	Auburn (C)	136

as, unlike those in metropolitan areas, many teachers in regional locations may have limited experience in teaching students with a language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) (Hammond and Miller, 2015) and less access to resources and support for students of refugee backgrounds.

### Refugees and asylum seekers: the broader policy context

Over the past five years, the political response to the surge in refugee numbers has been to tighten control over the entry of refugees into Australia. In 2013, the government established Operation Sovereign Borders, a border protection operation led by the military aimed at stopping people seeking asylum from coming to Australia by boat. Since late 2012, asylum seekers reaching Australia have been sent to offshore processing centres on either Nauru or Manus Island in Papua New Guinea for detention while their protection claims are being processed. This practice has continued though the processing centre on Manus Island closed in 2017. More recently, the Australian Government has placed restrictions on asylum seekers gaining access to social services such as the Status Resolution Support Services. In 2018, the Government announced a 60 per cent cut to this program, placing many families in even greater financial hardship and affecting many students of refugee backgrounds in NSW public schools (Refugee Council of Australia, 2018a).

The dominant media representation of refugees in Australia has been to see their arrival as a “crisis”. The increased number of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Australia has generated anxiety among many that they “might strain already depleted resources” (Green, 2013). This negative positioning of refugees and asylum seekers has the potential to impact students of refugee backgrounds in schools. Uptin et al.(2016), for example, refer to how this negative framing of refugees has “limited

the resources and access to education for young refugees” (p.612) and led to “a danger to quickly relabel young former refugees with deficit terms” (p.613).

### Educational issues concerning students of refugee backgrounds in Australia

The importance of schooling for children of refugee backgrounds has been acknowledged in a number of studies. Schools are a stabilising force in the lives of children and young people of refugee backgrounds as they provide a safe space for “new encounters, interactions and learning opportunities” (Matthews, 2008, p.32). Schools are not only sites for developing English language and literacy, which is a pre-requisite for educational success, they also play an active role in facilitating children and young people of refugee backgrounds to become citizens in their country of settlement by helping them to develop familiarity and a sense of belonging within their school and broader communities (Sidhu et al., 2011; Taylor and Sidhu, 2012; Cassity, 2012).

Adjusting to school, however, is not an easy task. Hammond and Miller (2015) explain that students from refugee backgrounds may find their transition to schooling challenging, due to traumatic experiences prior to their arrival in Australia. Together with this, their disrupted and limited access to formal schooling may result in significant gaps in educational knowledge and conceptual development and their understanding of school structure, practices and classroom routines, causing difficulties for their learning across the curriculum K-12 (Hammond and Miller, 2015).

To many students of refugee backgrounds, school may also give them “a sense of self as failure” (Cassity, 2012, p.63) due to their problems of “fitting in” within schools. Not only do many have difficulties in establishing peer relationships but

they also face comparisons with their Australian peers and may feel the constant pressure of having to catch up and close the substantial educational gaps between them (Cassity and Gow, 2006). Below we outline a number of major issues that affect the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds highlighted in the literature. These are challenges of English language and literacy acquisition, the racialisation of schooling experiences, transition to mainstream schooling and the impact of neoliberal policy agendas on refugee education. It is worth noting, however, that children and young people of refugee backgrounds are very resilient and, with the appropriate support, they can adapt to the host country and schooling environments more easily and achieve better learning outcomes (Rutter, 2006; Matthews, 2008; Miller et al., 2018).

## The challenges of English language and literacy acquisition

Developing proficiency in English is one of the biggest challenges that students of refugee backgrounds face. There are many reasons for this. Rutter (2006) explains how understanding social contexts is so important for acquiring a new language but that most teaching in schools is abstract and decontextualised, creating enormous difficulties for students of refugee backgrounds. Burgoyne and Hull (2007, p.15) provide examples of these abstract strategies, such as “alphabet and decontextualised written words” or visual representation based on Western conventions, considering them unsuitable for students of refugee backgrounds.

Also, while there have been studies to confirm the cognitive link between first and second languages (Cummins, 1977; Rutter, 2006), in many cases, students of refugee backgrounds have limited or no experience of literacy in their first language, which may hinder their ability to acquire a second language. This is the case for many students

of refugee backgrounds from South Sudan, for example, whose culture is largely oral-based and who find learning a print-based language particularly difficult (Sellars and Murphy, 2017). Dryden-Peterson (2015) adds that children of refugee backgrounds may be exposed to multiple languages during the periods of living in transit countries, resulting in language confusion and limited opportunities for attaining mastery in any of these.

Miller et al. (2005, p.23) also explain how students of refugee backgrounds face enormous difficulties in learning English due to their “lack of topic-specific vocabularies of academic subjects, understanding of register and genre (and the) cultural backgrounds to scaffold their understanding”. Specific issues faced by students of refugee backgrounds in learning English, include problems in recognising and matching sounds and letters of English, an over-reliance on teacher instructions and direction, and unfamiliarity with the approaches to reading and writing English masked by their oral fluency (Brown et al., 2006).

Dooley and Thangaperumal (2011, p.394) found that many secondary teachers focus on “technical aspects of reading and writing” and tend to provide “highly controlled instructions in basic literacy and genre analysis”. They propose supplementing such approaches with “interactive and dialogic pedagogy”, which promotes the development of transformative critical literacy moving beyond literacy as merely a technical skill and explores the cultural meanings that are embedded in social relations. These pedagogies place emphasis on interaction and the development of critical perspectives encouraging students to co-construct knowledge through relating concepts to prior experiences (Dooley, 2009).

There is also a lack of productive models of early literacy pedagogy to teach students

of refugee backgrounds in the middle years of school (Woods, 2009). Miller et al. (2014) examined the ways that teachers plan for EAL/D students of refugee backgrounds in a secondary school transition program in Victoria and found that they tended not to be guided by well thought-out programs and lesson plans and largely relied on their intuitive knowledge and their own habits, sometimes leading to ad hoc pedagogical practice. In response to the diverse English language and literacy needs of students of refugee backgrounds, they recommend strategies such as integrating language and context at the planning stage, using curriculum-based learning objectives to drive the selection of teaching materials and developing a flexible curriculum that prioritises students' needs to balance the teaching focus on content.

A language-focused approach can be used to support vocabulary development across key learning areas creating links between conceptual and linguistic understanding to help students overcome learning barriers (Miller, 2009). Despite these issues, Riggs and Due (2011) show a close correlation between refugee background students' commitment to learning English and inclusive practices within schools, suggesting students are far more willing to engage in English language interaction with their teachers and non-refugee peers when they feel a greater level of acceptance.

## The racialisation of schooling experiences

Research by the Foundation for Young Australians shows that students of refugee backgrounds experience high levels of racism in Australia, especially in schools (Mansouri et al., 2009). Studies of students of refugee backgrounds and schooling also confirm that many have experienced difficulties in developing peer relationships and encounter bullying of a racist nature in schools due to their accent and ethnicity. (Hek, 2005; Rutter, 2006; Uptin et al., 2013).

This may have a negative impact on these students' settlement and acculturation, as well as their psychological wellbeing and affect their ability to develop a sense of belonging (Mansouri et al., 2009).

Deep-rooted racism, manifest in the negative framing of refugees in policies and media, and stereotypes of ethnic groups have contributed to the educational marginalisation of refugees (Mansouri et al., 2009; Colvin, 2017). As Keddie (2012) notes, practices within schools can also contribute to the social reproduction of power inequalities, sustaining a view of whiteness as "normal" (Pugh et al., 2012). Even well-intentioned schooling practices may entail essentialised understandings of culture that reinforce problematic ethnic and refugee labels (Rutter, 2006; Noble and Watkins, 2014). Moreover, despite the shift in research on refugee education from pre-displacement trauma to an emphasis on resilience and ways to support students of refugee backgrounds (Miller et al., 2018), many are of the view that pedagogies in Australian schools are still framed in post-colonial terms, focusing on Western modes of knowledge and learning that promote inequitable power relations (Matthews, 2008; Riggs and Due, 2011).

In contrast to this, informed teacher perceptions and nuanced approaches to multicultural education have a role in promoting a more inclusive educational experience for students of refugee backgrounds. Hek (2005), for example, shows that the educational outcomes of students of refugee backgrounds can be improved by teachers who recognise and value their experiences. This highlights the need for teachers to understand the backgrounds, limitations and needs of these students through training in multicultural education (Miller et al., 2005) and adopting a "more specialised and individualised approach" to assist students of refugee backgrounds (Naidoo, 2012). Many teachers in NSW public schools do not receive

adequate training in critical multicultural education in their pre-service training or professional learning to enable them to develop inclusive practices for diverse classrooms (Watkins et al., 2016 Lean and Noble 2016). This is an important gap that needs to be addressed. As Rutter (2006) and others explain, training in informed anti-racist and inclusive practices are important steps towards countering marginalisation and inequities in refugee student education and disrupting the racialisation of refugees in broader social discourse (Keddie, 2012; Taylor and Sidhu, 2012).

## Transitioning to mainstream schooling

Depending on their age and where they settle, students of refugee backgrounds commencing school in NSW are either placed in an IEC or enter a mainstream school with support from an English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teacher. Despite recognition that transition to mainstream schooling is an area that requires special support, there has been limited research on examining the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds during transition, regardless of whether these transitions occur at the beginning of schooling in Australia, transitions from primary to high schools or from IECs to mainstream classes. De Heer et al. (2016), in their study of the transition of children aged 5-13 from IECs into mainstream classes in South Australia, found that most felt anxious prior to transition due to uncertainties concerning the change in context, their ability to speak English and potential difficulties in making friends. Despite the study showing the difficulties of the transition process, de Heer et al. emphasise the importance of friendship and how this has a strong influence on these students' feelings towards school and how it can facilitate transition. Equally important is how IECs allow these students to develop the

necessary “social capital” to enable them to understand the norms and barriers in schools that helps them to develop the ability to “fit in” within school environments (de Heer, et al., 2016).

The importance of IECs is also acknowledged by Due et al.(2015), who report on how teachers see this as the best model for ensuring the wellbeing and education of young refugee background students in Australia. IECs provide students of refugee backgrounds with a “safe place” for “scaffolded learning” allowing them to develop a sense of community. With the knowledge about students' prior and post-settlement issues, educators at IECs can assist teachers in mainstream schools when a student transitions to their class. However, concerns have been raised about the readiness of students when they exit IECs (after four or five terms in NSW), as this length of time may not be sufficient for students of refugee backgrounds who have had disrupted schooling to gain English proficiency to the required level (Miller et al., 2005). Hammond (2014) makes a similar observation in her NSW-based study. Not surprisingly, many students who transition from IECs to mainstream schools have negative experiences because they are unable to cope with the sudden growing demands of academic English and the content knowledge of various subjects across the curriculum (Oliff and Couch, 2005).

The transition of students of refugee backgrounds from IECs into mainstream classes may result in students with different levels of English proficiency being in the same class.

Teachers have reported additional workloads to adapt units to suit the abilities of students of refugee backgrounds (Miller, et al., 2005) and the growing pressure to complete mandatory aspects of the curriculum while ensuring all students can understand the content (Hammond et al., 2018). The possible lack of resources in

some schools and insufficient funding for EAL/D support could be a challenge to the successful transition of these students from IECs (Miller et al., 2005). In addition to this, many teachers in mainstream schools do not regard themselves as teachers of literacy (Dooley, 2009) and would have difficulty explaining aspects of language and literacy to students in the absence of EAL/D support.

Hammond (2014) outlines the kinds of pedagogical strategies that are needed in strengthening the language proficiency of students of refugee backgrounds and its contribution to developing deeper understanding and engagement, also noting that these may diminish when students transition to high school as this expertise is often missing.

Research by Miller et al. (2014) examining how teachers plan for refugee background students' transition from IECs into mainstream classrooms in Victoria, further highlights the need for teachers to rethink the ways in which they support students of refugee backgrounds. These strategies include developing explicit curriculum-based learning objectives and following through with appropriate strategies and resources to meet the specific needs of these students.

Ferfolja and Vickers (2010) examine the impact of school-based tutoring centres that make use of pre-service teachers as tutors that can also contribute positively to the transition of students of refugee backgrounds from IECs into mainstream classes. Given the importance of this transition phase, and the potential challenges for mainstream teachers, more research is needed to find alternative pedagogies to enhance the smooth transition for students of refugee backgrounds during these stages (de Heer et al., 2016).

## The impact of changing policy agendas on the education of students of refugee backgrounds

With the current trend towards neoliberalism within public policy shown in the greater role of the private sector, reduced public spending and the inclusion of corporate style management practices (Sidhu and Taylor, 2007), education systems in Australia are characterised by increasing school autonomy and financial responsibility, along with a growing emphasis on student outcomes, standardised testing and the ranking of school performance.

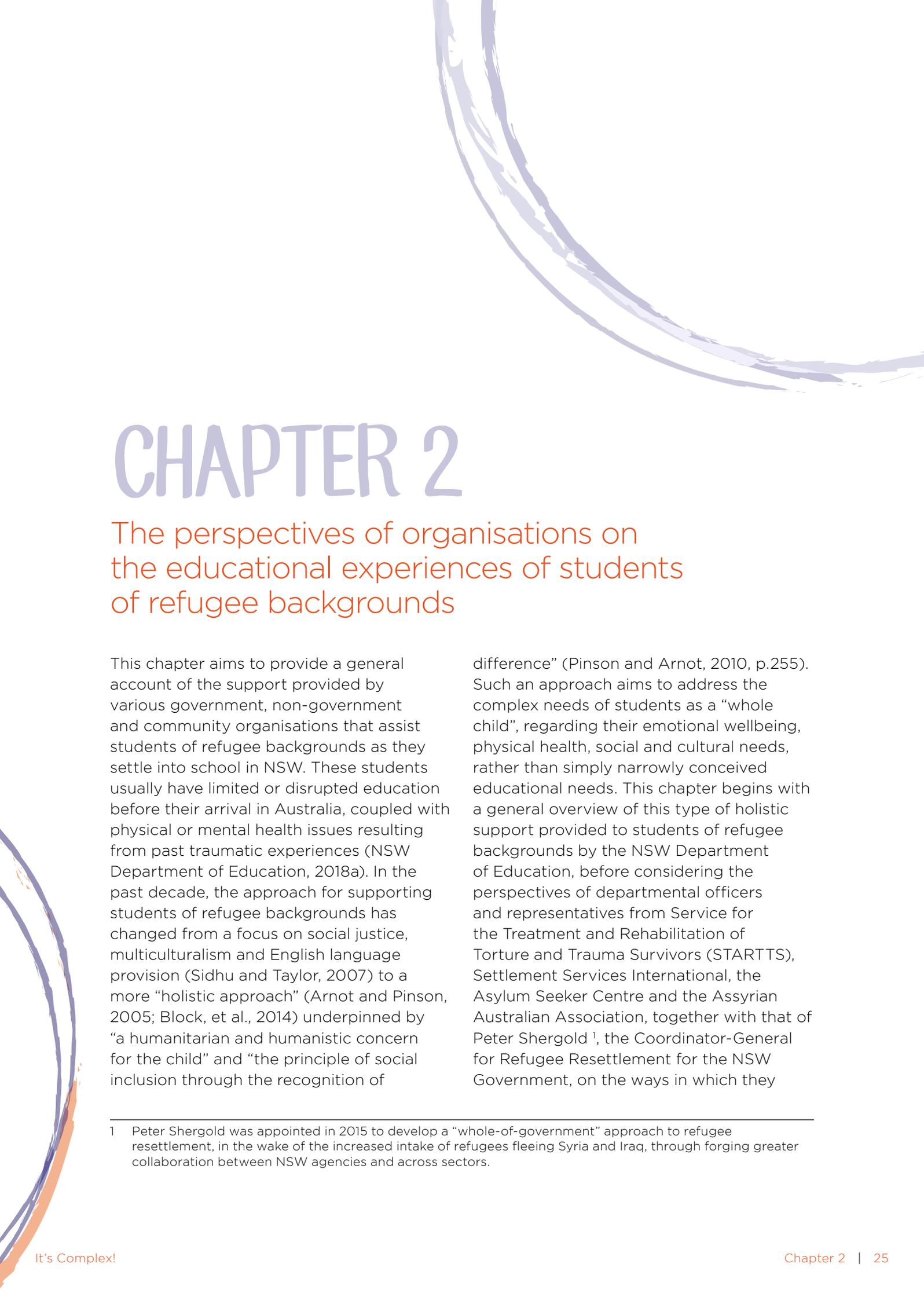
Education policies driven by a neoliberal rationality have had a considerable impact on students of refugee backgrounds. One example is the changes in the targeted funding of EAL/D programs for LBOTE students. While schools across NSW now have more autonomy to organise their EAL/D programs, it is marred by the growing responsibility of schools to finance these programs. This creates pressure for schools with limited budgets to provide adequate EAL/D support to students of refugee backgrounds with complex English language and literacy needs.

The marketisation of schools also leads to a growing emphasis on school performance and student achievement. Teachers are facing enormous pressure to deliver good results in the National Assessment Program of Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests, but may not have the required resources to ensure students of refugee backgrounds are adequately prepared to undertake these tests once in the mainstream (Woods, 2009). Sidhu and Taylor (2007) report on how some schools expressed concerns over the admission of large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds because their under-performance may affect their school's ranking on academic league tables, making them less attractive, for example, to international fee-paying students. This

may cause schools to compromise their commitment to equity and social justice. In addition to this, governments have been encouraging the development of partnership programs between schools and community organisations in order to draw together their resources to fill the void left by the reduction of public funding support (Sidhu and Taylor, 2009). Without a proper statewide strategy and supporting structure, however, these partnerships are often fraught with problems as some schools may not have the knowledge or resources to form effective partnerships, and these short-term relationships are not a substitute for schools having comprehensive educational programs in place to meet the long-term EAL/D and welfare needs of students of refugee backgrounds.

## Conclusion

A range of studies in this growing field have examined broader social and policy contexts, issues of racism, the educational challenges of refugee education and transition into the mainstream. Many also stress both the resilience of students of refugee backgrounds and the substantial efforts schools have made in supporting these students. In exploring these issues, it is generally teachers or the students themselves that are the focus of research. Rarely do studies try to engage with all actors involved in the education and settling contexts of students of refugee backgrounds, or position their voices in relation to local and broader issues. This report attempts to address these gaps by considering a range of actors' perspectives on the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds and the impact upon teachers and schools of these changing student demographics, and it is to this that we now turn.



# CHAPTER 2

## The perspectives of organisations on the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds

This chapter aims to provide a general account of the support provided by various government, non-government and community organisations that assist students of refugee backgrounds as they settle into school in NSW. These students usually have limited or disrupted education before their arrival in Australia, coupled with physical or mental health issues resulting from past traumatic experiences (NSW Department of Education, 2018a). In the past decade, the approach for supporting students of refugee backgrounds has changed from a focus on social justice, multiculturalism and English language provision (Sidhu and Taylor, 2007) to a more “holistic approach” (Arnot and Pinson, 2005; Block, et al., 2014) underpinned by “a humanitarian and humanistic concern for the child” and “the principle of social inclusion through the recognition of

difference” (Pinson and Arnot, 2010, p.255). Such an approach aims to address the complex needs of students as a “whole child”, regarding their emotional wellbeing, physical health, social and cultural needs, rather than simply narrowly conceived educational needs. This chapter begins with a general overview of this type of holistic support provided to students of refugee backgrounds by the NSW Department of Education, before considering the perspectives of departmental officers and representatives from Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), Settlement Services International, the Asylum Seeker Centre and the Assyrian Australian Association, together with that of Peter Shergold<sup>1</sup>, the Coordinator-General for Refugee Resettlement for the NSW Government, on the ways in which they

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Shergold was appointed in 2015 to develop a “whole-of-government” approach to refugee resettlement, in the wake of the increased intake of refugees fleeing Syria and Iraq, through forging greater collaboration between NSW agencies and across sectors.

**Table 7. Education programs for students of refugee backgrounds in NSW (NSW Department of Education, 2018d)**

Support programs for students of refugee backgrounds	
EAL/D programs	Students of refugee backgrounds may receive short-term intensive English at IECs or at local schools through the EAL/D New Arrival Program, followed by ongoing EAL/D teaching support at primary schools or high schools.
Targeted (individual student) funding for students of refugee backgrounds	Targeted funding is allocated to schools with a significant number of refugee background students enrolled. Primary schools may use this targeted funding to provide additional intensive English tuition for three years, while high schools may use this funding to provide additional English and literacy support (e.g. homework, tutorial and mentoring) for students of refugee backgrounds in transition from IECs to mainstream high schools.
Homework and tutorial support	The After School Program for Refugee Students provides after-school tuition with bilingual support to students of refugee backgrounds who have been in Australia for less than three years.
Bilingual support	School learning support officers (ethnic) are allocated at schools with newly arrived students of refugee background to provide bilingual support in the classroom and assist in liaising with parents and community members.  Interpreting and translation services are available to assist communication with students, parents and carers who do not speak or understand English.
Support programs for teachers	
New arrivals EAL/D teacher mentors	EAL/D teacher mentors provide professional support to newly appointed EAL/D teachers of students of refugee backgrounds in rural and regional NSW.
Refugee support leaders	In 2016, 17 school-based refugee support leaders were appointed to provide greater system support for schools with a significant enrolment of newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds across NSW.
Professional learning	Professional courses and materials are available to assist teachers of students of refugee backgrounds, such as Safety, Trust, Attachment, Responsibility and Skills (STARS) in Schools. This is a five-hour registered professional learning course designed to assist schools to support the settlement of students of refugee backgrounds.  Teaching Students from a Refugee Background is a 20-hour registered professional learning program designed to assist classroom teachers from K-12 to develop skills of teaching students of refugee backgrounds in mainstream schools.  Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) training programs are offered to school staff on issues about refugees and refugee trauma through workshops, seminars and individual consultancy to school counsellors.
Resources	A range of other resources are available on the NSW Department of Education's website to assist in planning, teaching and learning in relation to students of refugee backgrounds including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Roads to Refuge</li> <li>● Refugee readiness audio</li> <li>● Targeted support for students from a refugee background: information for primary school</li> <li>● Targeted support for students from a refugee background: information for high school</li> <li>● Whole school approaches</li> <li>● Enrolment and orientation</li> <li>● Making students feel safe</li> <li>● English language/bilingual support</li> <li>● Career and transition support</li> <li>● Community partnerships</li> </ul>

contribute to assisting students and their families to settle in Australia focusing on three themes that emerged from the data:

- the general approach and practices adopted in supporting students of refugee backgrounds
- the needs of students of refugee backgrounds as perceived by these organisations, and
- the challenges faced by these organisations in meeting these needs.

## Support provided by the NSW Department of Education

Current education programs for students of refugee backgrounds in NSW come under the broad umbrella of “multicultural education”, which encompasses a wider objective to promote “Intercultural understanding in schools — supporting English language learners, refugees and newly arrived students” (NSW Department of Education, 2018b). Students of refugee backgrounds benefit from a broader range of supporting programs (such as EAL/D and bilingual support), which are also available for migrants and international students, as well as a number of programs specifically targeting students of refugee backgrounds.

Attending school is a human right of school-aged children and young people migrating to Australia, regardless of their visa category. Newly arrived young people of refugee backgrounds entering the NSW schooling system, can receive up to four or five terms of intensive English language tuition at an IEC in metropolitan Sydney and Wollongong. Students of refugee backgrounds who settle in regional and rural areas can study in intensive English classes at a school with EAL/D teachers for 18 months. While there are no primary school-based IECs, primary school-aged children can receive initial intensive English support at their local public school (NSW Department of Education, 2018c).

The key initiatives provided by the NSW Department of Education that target the educational needs of students of refugee backgrounds are summarised in Table 7 and are divided into supporting programs for students of refugee backgrounds and the teachers of these students. A team of NSW Department of Education personnel coordinates and implements this support.

In addition, the NSW Department of Education also launched a number of initiatives to address the wellbeing and health needs of students of refugee backgrounds and to provide social and cultural support for their families to help facilitate their settlement in Australia. These initiatives are outlined in Table 8, page 28.

## The general approach and practices adopted by organisations supporting students of refugee background

Throughout our interviews with the representatives of various organisations, the adoption of a “holistic model” for refugees and asylum seekers at their organisations based on a “compassionate model of social inclusion” (Pinson and Arnot, 2010) was often referred to as the appropriate approach to support students of refugee backgrounds. Arnot and Pinson (2005, p. 4) explain how those using a holistic model:

... perceive asylum seekers and refugee pupils with multiple, complex needs (learning, social and emotional). This understanding informs their support system, not only in terms of the different aspects of support they cover, but also in terms of the ways in which they construct the purpose of the support in place.

This holistic approach adopted by these organisations is in contrast to the restrictive stance of the Australian Government in its immigration policies and the negative framing of the public discourse concerning the “crisis” of refugees and asylum seekers coming to Australia. As Doris, from one organisation, commented:

**Table 8. Initiatives to address the health and wellbeing needs of students of refugee backgrounds (NSW Department of Education, 2018d)**

Student wellbeing	Refugee Student Team (counselling services) provide additional counselling services to school and assist school counsellors across NSW in dealing with students of refugee backgrounds.
Student health	NSW Refugee Health Services, Local Area Health Services and Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) provide health care and specialist counselling for newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds in some schools.
Settling-in program	This is a program conducted by trained school counsellors and teachers to assist newly arrived refugees to adjust to life in Australia.
Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) course	FICT courses are conducted by STARTTS facilitators to assist newly arrived families from refugee backgrounds in dealing with settlement.

To me it is about humanity. It is not about just ticking the box ... I actually do it. Or someone is sick, someone is homeless ... so, we do things to cater, to help these vulnerable [people], you know. There are housing issues, marital issues, kids' issues, you know, I make sure that the issue is solved before they leave the office.

Representatives from other organisations also emphasised how they recognise and cater for the complexity of needs of refugees and asylum seekers with an objective of assisting their long-term integration into Australian society. Nancy, from the NSW Department of Education, added:

There are still lots of issues in and about getting refugees — I think they do need that wrap around effect. You need everything to be ... or the possibility of everything - you mightn't need everything but you have got to make sure that everything is there in case people do need it because it goes back to what kind of society Australia is going to be. And if we don't integrate these people in a way that is good for them and is also good for us, you know, I mean otherwise we have got lots of problems.

A number of supporting programs, such as those mentioned in the previous section, have been designed with a focus on the “whole person”, which pays as much

attention to students' post-settlement needs as to their pre-displacement conditions and traumatic experiences. In the words of Karen, from the NSW Department of Education, we need to:

... see them as individuals and that's why ... you need to get information about students ... you need to find out all about the trauma they have been through. But you need to get a good overall picture of the student and their prior schooling and who they are living with and what sort of conflict they came from and who are they living with here — an overall picture because that's, more than anything else I think, it is a whole person approach with whole families.

One of the key conditions of implementing what the Department of Education sees as a “whole school response”, is developing an ethos of inclusion in schools so that students of refugee backgrounds are welcome and accepted. As Karen explained:

You know, just a school being an inclusive environment, classrooms being culturally and linguistically inclusive. Ensuring that ... working on anti-racism to ensure that there is no ongoing kinds of incidents and issues

that are making students feel unsafe in an ongoing way, and [students] welcome in an ongoing way.

The research by Arnot and Pinson (2005) identified that “an ethos of inclusion” at schools was key to successful programs for students of refugee backgrounds. Ted, from an organisation working with schools that assists refugees recovering from trauma, echoed this point.

It is the environment within schools that are able to help facilitate that healing. So when you have schools that are respectful you know for refugee students, are open, are engaging and adaptive to their needs. I think that is the thing that enables people to go on to successful lives.

Some interviewees added that, in order to develop an ethos of inclusion in schools and facilitate the education of students of refugee backgrounds, it is essential that schools encourage a better understanding of refugees and their experiences within schools as a whole, including teachers, staff and non-refugee students. As Karen suggested, it would be useful in countering the negative image of refugees portrayed in the media.

I tend to think that schools and teachers that have had experiences with refugee students and families tend to – they have their views shaped by the media. They work against those views in ... anyone who has had personal contact; close contact doesn't tend to have that. I think in some schools where, for example, the way it comes to me is sometimes when people are delivering professional learning, myself included, you get a whole school staff there, you know, 80 people you have got quite a cross-section there.

Peter Shergold, the Coordinator-General for Refugee Resettlement for the NSW Government, agreed.

If we are going to do this properly it isn't just providing these additional English and support services to the refugee students. It is actually doing things with all the other students in the

school to actually get them to understand the experience of being a refugee and having an understanding etc.

Other representatives from different organisations working with students of refugee backgrounds also recommended the introduction of school learning programs (talks or guest visits) about refugees and asylum seekers and related topics to whole schools to boost the understanding of staff and students. Nancy, from another organisation, added that issues around refugees are rarely discussed in schools, but it is crucial to enhance the general knowledge within school communities of refugees and asylum seekers as this would have a positive impact. It is particularly important for schools in regional areas that have begun receiving a growing number of students of refugee backgrounds.

The crucial role of school principals in fostering an inclusive school environment and providing support for students of refugee backgrounds was acknowledged by several interviewees, particularly given schools now have greater autonomy to set priorities and design programs. As Ted remarked: “We acknowledge that the school principal has an exceptionally key role within the school obviously. Often the advocate for, you know, refugee issues might be an EAL/D teacher.” Nancy was of a similar view: “This is what we say about any kind of change in schools is the attitude of the principal and the support of the principal will make huge differences.”

## The needs of students of refugee backgrounds

Key areas of need identified by the representatives of these different organisations were similar in many ways to those that both school executive and teachers pinpointed and which are considered in chapters 3 and 4. Of key significance was English language and literacy acquisition. As Nancy commented:

Look, nearly all of them say — and this is common to people who enter Australia and English is not their first language — language is the most important thing. So, they have got to learn to communicate and a lot of catch up to do with that.

Supporting the acculturation of students of refugee backgrounds was also considered a key need. Ted, whose organisation uses a psychosocial approach in assisting this process, felt this was an area that deserved more attention. According to Ted, students of refugee backgrounds sometimes struggle with their social, psychological and cultural transition from one country to another during settlement.

To complicate the matter, these students are usually scarred with traumatic experiences during their displacement and affected by the physical and psychological transition from childhood to young adulthood. Their struggles of acculturation could be interpreted by teachers, who lack training in intercultural learning, as deviant behaviour. For instance, a young male student having experienced the militarised context of Syria may demonstrate hyper-masculine behaviour in reaction to situations. Failure to conform to the expected behaviour of schooling could be interpreted by teachers as “bad” behaviour, causing tension between the teachers and students. As Ted explained:

What often happens is that there is not enough support for acculturation ... and when that is laid on [their] trauma, you get all sorts of complex problems. And what schools often don't understand is that showing kids the rules

or doing a quick orientation for two hours is not enough, nowhere near enough to prepare kids for what they are going into and to shift from where they were.

To resolve these issues, Ted recommended that schools develop a cultural understanding of where the behaviours of these students come from and try to support them in a safe and supportive learning environment. He added that more engagement between schools and the community can develop this cultural awareness.

Many interviewees also referred to issues of problematic labelling and were in agreement that “refugee” or “asylum seeker” can carry stigma and be an impediment to these students’ schooling experiences and integration into Australian society. Doris, who worked with students from refugee backgrounds, provided the following advice:

Do not treat them as if they are refugees. Treat them like they are just a normal student, please, because when they are treated that way it is a taboo on them. They feel isolated. They feel discriminated.

Mia was of a similar view: “After young people have been here a while they don’t identify as either, they don’t identify themselves as being migrants and refugees, they are just a young person ... that is what they want.”

Another common issue faced by students of refugee backgrounds was racism. Karen and Ted pointed out that this is more common with students from African backgrounds due to the visibility of their skin colour. Another interviewee who worked with students of refugee backgrounds stressed that racism can take different forms — as casual racism or discrimination due to their inability to speak English or their accents — and it can be initiated by those from a range of ethnic backgrounds (some of whom have a refugee background themselves). Eddie discussed this in some detail.

It is across the board, and there are different ways that bullying can be formulated whether it be because of their language difficulties and they are teasing them based on their accents and the words that come through their mouth ... They may not use the right terms for ... conversation albeit because of their background, simply being regarded as terrorists because they are from a country with a particular background, or maybe because they are from a particular background ... African ... or in some cases even some young people find it intimidating being from some ... as a result of them being associated with a particular culture, ... Hip hop culture for example.

To address this issue, Nancy, put emphasis on the importance of “an atmosphere of inclusion” in schools and Mia urged greater support for young people to “build up their resilience”.

## The challenges faced by organisations working with students of refugee backgrounds

The representatives of these supporting organisations identified a number of key challenges they faced in providing relevant services to students of refugee backgrounds and their families. One of these was providing appropriate support to the growing diversity of students from refugee backgrounds. This diversity is not only reflected through the large number of source countries of recent refugees and asylum seekers, it is also shown in the socio-economic differences within different groups. A number of factors — age, gender, family structure and previous schooling experience — can also make a huge difference to students’ learning needs and educational experiences. As Katherine, from another organisation, put it:

It really varies. We have got people from about 80 different countries so we do have quite a lot from the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. We have some families from Mongolia and some from Eastern Europe and then some from countries in

Africa; the likes of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Central Africa and the western side. Yeah, all over really.

Karen agreed:

We make a point of talking about the diversity of students, families from refugee backgrounds. So, you get people who are farmers and people who are PhD holders and we say — ordinary people; extraordinary experiences that led them to that ... We also put an emphasis on previous school experience. So, for example, a lot of the Syrian students that have been coming recently, the conflict in Syria has been going on for a certain number of years. The primary school-age children now haven’t been in school. But the high school-age students, many of them have been in school. They have now had disrupted schooling for a number of years but they started off in a really good education system. A lot of them are very aspirational. Their parents as well are highly qualified professionals. So, it is really, really variable but I think at the same time particular groups have had experiences that are common to them and different to others.

Such diversity among students of refugee backgrounds means that “one-size-fits-all” programs are no longer applicable. Rather than providing standardised services, Eddie explained how it is more important to provide “individualised” programs based on “each person’s needs”. Sharing this view, Mia added that in order to enhance the success of the initiatives to support students of refugee backgrounds, organisations need to tailor their programs to match the lived experience of the individual: “You have to tailor activities and tailor plans to work with families. And if they are tailored, it will work.”

There was also concern about the rapidly increasing numbers of students of refugee backgrounds. As mentioned in chapter 1, about 40 per cent of humanitarian visa holders in 2017 are settled in NSW and more than 10,400 students of refugee backgrounds are presently enrolled in NSW public schools. Owing to an additional 21,000 refugees from Syria and Iraq between 2016 and 2017 (among which

more than one third are school-aged children and young people), there has been a sudden increase of students of refugee backgrounds in schools, straining the resources and services of schools and these supporting organisations.

Interviewees also pointed to the “overcrowding” of the IECs, as many of the newly arrived students were concentrated in a small number of IECs located in the vicinity of a handful of settlement areas. It was also acknowledged that the increased number of students of refugee backgrounds had added to the workload of teachers, who were already “overloaded with demands”.

As Nancy described the situation: “One of the issues is that in areas of high refugee numbers, the staff members have had difficulty, you know, felt more stressed.” This was particularly the case for some schools that received less support from external organisations. Some of the teachers took on extra work to assist with the settlement of students and their families but also then took on some of the traumatic experiences that they heard from these new arrivals, which could lead, as Ted explained, to “negative psychosocial outcomes” for themselves.

Peter Shergold pointed out a different problem at the other end of the spectrum — the difficulties of service providers gaining access to groups such as sub-class 202 Visa holders (i.e. Special Humanitarian Program arrivals who are sponsored, usually by family, as compared with unsponsored visa holders).

It is often harder for you to get access to services immediately because your family come and meet you at the airport and take you home and all of that. So, it is harder for organisations like [Settlement Services International] etc to get access. We have to work harder to make sure that people know what the services are that are available.

As most of the interviewees pointed out, the level of support available for students of refugee backgrounds varied from region to

region and school to school. For example, additional resources for supporting services tended to be found in local government areas with a critical mass of students of refugee backgrounds, while areas with small numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, such as new settlement areas in regional NSW, had limited support especially in areas such as EAL/D and health.

As one interviewee pointed out, the level of support for students of refugee backgrounds also varies across schools. As Nancy explained: “In one school you will get amazing support going and, in another school — chaotic. And in another school, it is invisible.”

Ted added that the inconsistency across schools in providing support to students of refugee backgrounds also poses a challenge for their work.

If everything was uniform we would be able to do things a lot easier but considering that every school is different ... and sometimes the processes within schools are different, and the implementation of departmental policies can also differentiate across the state as well, which can sometimes be an impediment to the work that we do and can also be a bit of a hurdle too.

The funding for refugee support services and programs attracted criticism from some interviewees. Many were dissatisfied with the “short-termism” of funding arrangements, leading to the unsustainability of many initiatives and loss of expertise. Quinn, for example, referred to the case of a program that he ran.

It hurts me just to bring a program or a system to an end without evaluation. I haven't seen anything evaluated in this project I managed ... this was cut. I don't understand ... it is all political.

Mia also talked about her frustration with the government's funding for students of refugee backgrounds.

I have been around for a very long time and what I have seen ... Interventions which

have proven to be effective then there [is] restructuring ... key positions at the Education Department disappear ... I think the government needs to acknowledge that it has a responsibility not just to pilot things but to sustain interventions that are working, and it has a necessity for policy not to just be a token principle but to be linked to a plan which has actually been implemented and which has immediate outcomes.

A related issue concerning the funding of refugee settlement services is the tendering process, which has been criticised for favouring large and established organisations. Smaller organisations, despite their history of running specialised programs, are usually outbid by large organisations. This problem was recognised by Peter Shergold.

This organisation or that organisation can't always get [the contract] – even though [they] are doing something at the [suburb] level which is really good. You know unless [they] can deliver across the whole of western Sydney [they] don't get really a chance to win the contract.

Given the complex needs of students of refugee backgrounds and their families, many of the interviewees pointed positively to an emerging trend of inter-agency cooperation in the provision of holistic services to those in need. In Peter Shergold's words: "things are being designed to be delivered in a more collaborative way than in the past." But, as he noted, getting this collaboration embedded in core business in the public service is still a major challenge.

One good example of inter-agency cooperation in the delivery programs to support students of refugee backgrounds was a health forum observed at an IEC in western Sydney. The forum brought together more than 20 attendees from health authorities, doctors, nurses, non-governmental health groups, teachers, school principals to brainstorm and discuss strategies to tackle the issue of obesity concerning young migrants (including students of refugee backgrounds) on

different levels. There was a purposeful dialogue across different sectors. At the end of the forum, a meaningful engagement had been achieved with a clear strategy being identified and some planning of activities for the young people, their families, schools and the community more broadly.

In view of the importance of having an extensive horizontal network with IECs, schools and other supporting organisations, many of these agencies have dedicated personnel to act as an interface between different organisations and to coordinate the cooperation between them. For instance, some interviewees mentioned the crucial role of refugee support leaders based at schools to draw together services available from different organisations, be it in the areas of counselling, youth work, settlement or health. Some organisations tried to "make concerted efforts to reach out" to schools or other organisations or setting up liaison officer positions. Ted spoke of how different organisations work together.

We sort of had to sit down to think, well, now we have increased resources, how do we work together without doubling up of resources and treading on one another's shoes and seeing ourselves as in competition with one another and we make certain efforts to sit down and to, you know, to plan out and to see who does what, where are our strengths and how we can work together and I feel that a lot of the roles have become interdependent ... I suppose we have to have hard conversations around how we work together because originally we didn't know.

While horizontal networks between schools and supporting organisations are quite common, the vertical connections between supporting organisations and government departments at the state or federal levels are less frequent and even sporadic. Government or semi-government organisations tend to have better connections with government bodies, but non-government or charity organisations lamented the lack of communication

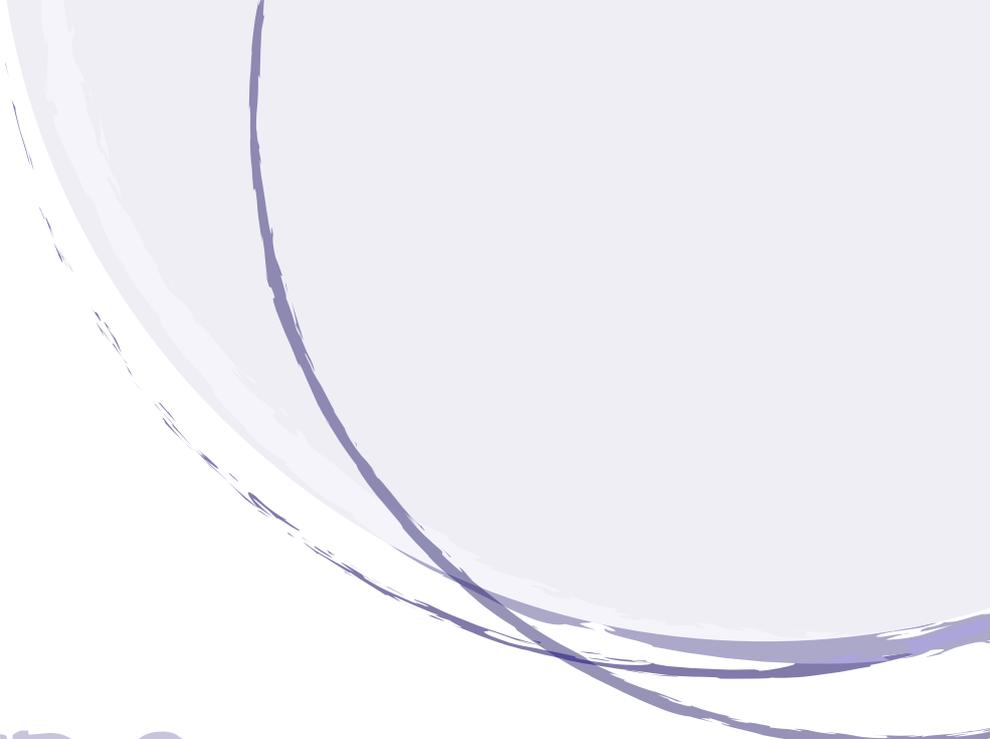
between them and the government, which made their work difficult. As Katherine remarked:

We sort of don't know what is going to happen. We are often told about policy changes with very short notice ... and it is all very last minute, it is never giving us any time to prepare.

While acknowledging the importance of inter-agency cooperation, some interviewees admitted that it is also the hardest part of their job. As Eddie explained, to make a collaborative relationship work, requires a lot of effort and skill in coordinating with stakeholders from different organisations to make sure everyone is “on the same agenda and understanding of what we are trying to achieve, bringing commonality into practice and ensuring that we are on the same page” and it requires “a flexibility to be able to kind of adjust and be understanding of achieving the same outcomes but with a different approach”.

## Conclusion

These representatives of the various organisations outlined many key challenges confronting those who support students of refugee backgrounds and their families. This diverse array of issues usefully sets the scene for the ways school executive, teachers, parents and students voice their concerns and responses to the educational experiences of these students in their school communities. We now turn to each of these groups of participants.



# CHAPTER 3

## The perspectives of executive staff on the education of students of refugee backgrounds

In this chapter we begin to draw on data derived from the 10 schools involved in the study, here focusing on the perspectives of principals, deputies and other senior executives within these schools.

In most cases the data were obtained through one-on-one interviews. In three schools, however, focus groups of executive team members were held, one of which included six staff whose roles, while having a much broader remit, involved key responsibilities around support for students of refugee backgrounds and their families within the school. As indicated in the introduction, these schools were a diverse mix of primary and secondary schools and IECs located in the Sydney metropolitan area and regional locations.

Their student populations also varied considerably, not only in terms of numbers of students of refugee backgrounds but with the size and composition of their broader LBOTE populations and other demographic factors such as socio-economic status, enrolments of Aboriginal

students and those with physical and intellectual disabilities. Despite this variation, the executive of these schools had many common concerns regarding the education of students of refugee backgrounds together with much that was very positive about how their school communities were assisting these students and their families to settle in Australia. Given the varied demographics of these schools, local issues were also evident, which are similarly examined here. Overall, we focus on seven main themes emerging from the data:

- the increasing complexity of school populations
- the specific needs of students of refugee backgrounds
- the needs of the parents and carers of students of refugee backgrounds
- teacher capacity for meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds
- the levels and forms of support that teachers and schools need
- support from external organisations

- how the NSW Teachers Federation can support teachers and schools in the education of students of refugee backgrounds.

## The increasing complexity of school populations

In their own way, each of the schools involved in the study have quite complex student populations with the arrival of increasing numbers of students of refugee backgrounds adding to this complexity. For a couple of the schools, this was nothing new. They had a long history of receiving students of refugee backgrounds. As the deputy at Pendlebury PS remarked:

Wherever there is a crisis in the world, we then received the refugees from there. So when I first arrived there were South Americans, Vietnamese, the Bosnian conflict and we have moved to the Middle East conflict and Rohingya students as well. So, it is always ... the refugees have always been here.

What has changed, however, is the number and type of refugees and their much wider dispersal across schools in Sydney and NSW. In a couple of schools with students of predominantly Anglo-Australian backgrounds, the presence of students of refugee backgrounds within the school took a period of adjustment for the school community. This was not only because of their increasing number — in some cases the population of students of refugee backgrounds was very low — but also because they represented a visible difference within the school. This was particularly the case with students of various African backgrounds whose colour marked them as different and girls of Muslim backgrounds wearing the hijab who similarly stood out. Their plight was further complicated by the negative media representation of refugees influencing how some members of school communities received these new arrivals. As one deputy commented:

They believe what is in the media, they distrust things they don't know and I think it was easy to judge a group of people by their religion or their appearance or their country rather than getting to know them.

In this particular case the deputy added, “I think a lot of our refugee kids have been very good and they have actually won people over” but such experiences are important to note.

While Australia may have one of the most culturally diverse populations in the world with successful policies of multiculturalism, this diversity is not evenly spread and the composition of this diversity can also be quite geographically varied.

Different groups of refugees settle, or are settled, in various locations overlaying previous waves of migration and patterns of settlement creating very different dynamics with which schools have to contend. These comments by school executive are indicative of how some schools may need to be better prepared for the arrival of students of refugee backgrounds and cognisant of their school's important role in mediating the settlement of these students and the response of their broader school communities.

This is no easy task, as one principal explained: “I know the community around us. I know there are significant pockets of racism in the streets around us which is concerning ... as our community changes and dynamics change in the school we have noticed more of it.” The realisation of this is important as meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds is not simply about focusing upon them but upon schools as a whole and how they are positioned within their broader communities.

Together with these complex dynamics within and outside schools, there is also complexity in the refugee experience; the need to understand, as one principal explained, “they are not a homogeneous group”. In terms of recent arrivals of students of refugee backgrounds from Syria

and Iraq, he added: “There are different groups ... based on religious background, ethnic background....” Another principal took this even further saying: “You know, they are individuals and they all have a different journey to where they are now.”

An executive member at another school pointed out the need to understand the differences between refugee visas and the impact of this not only on the students of refugee backgrounds and their families but also in the forms of support that schools then needed to provide.

She explained:

So much comes down to the visa a refugee has. For example, a 200 Visa is a humanitarian visa from UNHCR. They are provided with accommodation, someone will take them to Medicare, set up a bank account, take them to Centrelink, enrol them in schools. They will have a case worker for six months, which is really to help them settle well into Australia in the short term. But then, most of our refugee students come with a 202 Visa which means that somebody has proposed them to come to Australia. And while they do get support they don't get as much support. And there is a big difference. Refugee Health will do a check on all the 200 Visa holders and straight away we know that there may be a health issue. If they are a 202 visa holder that health check might not have been done. 200 Visa holders are also assessed by staff whether they feel that they need trauma counselling on arrival. That doesn't happen to the 202 Visa holders ... the visa number is critical.

Together with this, she commented on other visa types:

But we also have students who are on temporary protection visas — a 050 Visa — who are still awaiting to see whether their claim as being refugee is going to be approved. These children have been at our school, some of them since 2013 ... and they are still waiting. So, you can imagine the mental health issues with that. How that impacts on the family and then how that impacts on the children.

At another school, there was discussion of yet another visa type, 204, for women at risk and where this school was located had been a target area for holders of this visa.

So, lots of our Afghani families are single mums. And our Burmese families and some African background families, just have mum at home which, you know, depending on how resilient mum is, some of the older children have lots of responsibilities.

Such comments offer further evidence of the complex nature of refugee populations within schools, the range of support this necessitates and how different visa types may place the onus of providing this support upon schools. As mentioned, however, these responsibilities are not divorced from those of other students within schools whose education may also be affected by a multiplicity of factors that are similarly extraneous to the schools themselves. As the principal of Pulver PS remarked:

I guess we are kind of, we have almost become a community centre and this is something that I find quite challenging and I think it is just a symptom of modern society. In the past communities were much closer knit and there were more, whether it was a social club or the church or, you know, the local sport club, you know, whatever people had, those networks, whereas now it is the school. So we get a lot of requests that are far removed from our brief as a school.

In the case of refugees, however, their networks may have been totally destroyed with loss of family, community associations and all that is familiar, together with settling in a foreign land. In such circumstances schools become important anchor points, sites where community associations are rebuilt providing the possibility of a future for students of refugee backgrounds and their families. The important role schools perform cannot be underestimated but nor can the enormity of the task, schools and teachers are confronted with in meeting the

range of needs of both students of refugee backgrounds and their families, some of which are considered below.

## Meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds

It is 8.40am at Pendlebury PS and the playground is already a buzz. Children of various ages and cultural backgrounds are engaged in a range of activities playing handball, sitting in groups talking, racing about, often with younger siblings not yet of school age. Their parents, mainly mothers but some fathers and grandparents, sit on the playground benches or stand in groups talking with others, some with prams and younger children at their side. Women in hijabs, chadors or khimars mix with others without. There are many different forms of attire including women of African backgrounds wearing geles or tignons. All form a part of the school's cultural landscape. A teacher moves freely among the crowd chatting with parents, students and surveilling the playground, her high-vis vest, a marker she is on duty. Many children and parents are lined up at the canteen but there is an even longer queue of students in front of a row of desks where two teachers' aides are making toasted cheese sandwiches on speed rotation and handing them to students in an orderly line who either ask for one or two of these or hold up the requisite number of fingers as Arabic jostles with English and other languages and the children chatter as they wait to be served. Those serving, however, insist on a "please" or "thank-you" in English before each child moves off and the next in line gives their order.

This is the breakfast club, a form of support that other schools in the project also provided, offering different foods and staffed in different ways, with teachers, support staff and also students, but all designed to ensure children are fed before classes commence for the day.

While breakfast clubs are not unique to schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, with many found in schools in areas of considerable socio-economic disadvantage, many families of students of refugee backgrounds experience financial hardship and such

support ensures their children are better placed to engage in learning than if they had to do without. This account is also included here as it is emblematic of the range of support that schools provide as they attempt to meet the needs of students of refugee backgrounds and their families which, as the principal above explained, are often far removed from what is considered "the brief" of schools.

In discussion with principals and other senior executive across the 10 project schools, the area of greatest need identified, was that of welfare, not only ensuring students were fed, housed and felt safe but that there was support for those who experienced psychological trauma as, without addressing this, it was considered difficult for students' educational needs to be met. As the principal of Harperville HS explained:

They have been through a lot of trauma. We hear so many stories of, you know, family members being blown up, family members being killed, often right next to the person that is here in our school ... so, really the initial need for them is to settle and just to become accustomed to a peaceful way of life. A lot of them are hypervigilant. For example, we have an evacuation drill. It is really amazing that for most people an evacuation drill is just that, a drill. For some of our refugee kids, it's "I am going to go and hide behind the tree" because that's a signal that a bomb is going to be exploding ... So there are all those issues that they face.

An executive member in another school referred to the other effects of trauma that led to "students [who] are much more volatile than they would have been 20 years ago. Much more aggressive, much more physical, and again, depending on what their experience is." While prizing the resilience of students of refugee backgrounds, one principal explained how they may lack "the ability to process an issue in a logical way that is not emotional, it is not reactionary. They tend to go from

zero to 1000 kilometres an hour in two and half seconds and it can be over small, minor things.”

Dealing with students who experience such trauma requires particular expertise and an understanding that it is not just the students who bear these mental scars; it is also many of their parents that affect these students as well. As one primary school deputy explained:

A lot of our students become the parents. And so, the children are taking their parents and being interpreters at medical appointments and whatever else and basically almost self-parenting in a lot of cases so that whole social, emotional component and those formative years, you know, being led by example by parents is just often not occurring.

Executive members also commented on these students’ broader health needs and the importance of having access to health services within their school; support that other schools lacked the means to provide. One principal pointed out:

There are not many children that go through the refugee health nurse that don’t need referring to some other service. There are problems with hearing, any number of things have been picked up by our refugee health nurses. But that’s only one day a week and they can only see three or four students in any one day so we are never going to get through all our students.

In addition to issues of trauma and other health-related matters, school executive also referred to the impact of either disrupted schooling or the lack of any previous experience of schooling on how well students of refugee backgrounds were able to settle into school in Australia. One principal explained:

We get a lot of students who have been in refugee camps in Turkey and Lebanon and, part of the problem with the students’

education in a lot of those countries, they haven’t been allowed to go to school because they are not citizens.

An executive member at Pendlebury PS summed it up nicely by saying many simply didn’t know how “you do school per se”, adding “just things like the different layout of school, how you behave and the differences that way, like cultural sorts of norms and expectations”. The significance of such forms of acculturation cannot be underestimated. The routines of school, and academic endeavour more broadly, need to be learned and habituated given they are a precursor for engaging in school-based learning. For those in Australia who begin school from kindergarten, and who may have attended childcare and preschool education, acquiring these aspects of learning has been a long, staged process. For many students of refugee backgrounds, this process needs to be fast-tracked, developing capacities that are acquired alongside many others, in particular the acquisition of English language and literacy.

Of course, the teaching of English language and literacy varies depending on the age of students and where they settle. Those of a high-school age in metropolitan areas will attend an IEC for up to five terms and, while the acquisition of English becomes the focus during this period, it is not without its challenges. As one IEC deputy remarked: “We give them a test and 90 per cent of the time we find that the students are total beginners so they don’t have the language, the literacy skills to be able to function in a mainstream high school.”

Yet such skills need to be acquired within a relatively short period before entering the mainstream when students are required to cope with the language and literacy demands of various subjects across the curriculum. This is particularly difficult for older students transitioning into the senior years of high school. In schools with sufficient numbers and funding, bridging classes are established to ease this

process or students may be encouraged to transition to TAFE to further develop their language and literacy to the required level if they intend undertaking the HSC. The whole transition process from IECs to mainstream high schools is considered in more detail in chapter 4 where teachers provide their perspectives on the process.

For high school-aged students of refugee backgrounds, who have settled outside metropolitan areas, the teaching of English language and literacy is approached very differently, as one executive member of a regional high school explained:

Certainly the language needs and having a program at the school so that they become proficient as quickly as possible so that they are able to access the curriculum that is really important. But because it is different in Sydney, because in Sydney they go into an IEC for that sort of 12 months, here they come straight into a mainstream high school.

Schools in regional areas presented with this challenge, that have sufficient numbers and funding, may establish a transition class that operates in lieu of an IEC but the extent to which they can draw on the same level of resourcing and teaching expertise is debatable, issues that are explored further in chapter 4. Of course, all primary school-aged students of refugee backgrounds, whether in metropolitan areas or not, do not attend IECs and are catered for within mainstream schools. Once again, the demands of teaching in such contexts and the degree to which teachers have the required skills to do so are considered in more detail in chapter 4. Here it is more a matter of acknowledging how acquiring English language and literacy is a key need for students of refugee backgrounds and how their age and where they settle determines the form of support they receive.

Other needs that school executive raised relate to issues of gender that were more pronounced in high school contexts. A number commented on the difficulties

of engaging older male students, those between 15 and 17 years of age, with one commenting:

In terms of issues for us, it has been the male students predominantly, they don't want to be at school, they really want to be at work. And even if it is a low-paying kind of employment they still prefer that to actually being at school because that is now what they have been accustomed to [prior to settling in Australia]. So, it is very hard for them to adjust to a classroom where there are rules. You have got to wear your uniform every day. In all of those things that they have left behind many years ago but now we are actually imposing upon them when they come to school.

For younger male students these issues didn't seem to arise, rather, many commented on their ability to "fit in" using sport as a mechanism to do so. One deputy pointed out that "from my observation in the playground with lots of the boys [they] mix completely in all different groups and it is usually around sport. And they play handball, basketball, football, soccer".

For some girls, however, it was a little more difficult although their ability to "fit in" was largely dependent on the cultural make-up of the student population of the school they attended. In one school with increasing numbers of students of refugee backgrounds but whose existing population was predominantly Anglo-Australian, the deputy felt their settling was "a bit slower, they tend to stay together a little more but they are happy to sit and talk". She felt this was a result of cultural differences between the girls of refugee backgrounds who were from various countries: Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, Iraq and the Congo and those of Anglo-Australian backgrounds, commenting that:

I think the dress issue is an issue for the Anglo girls here. I think they feel, they are unsure about, you know, the differences in dress ... and the girls, you know, we don't have a lot

of alternate role models for the girls, we only have a few. But a lot of them conform to the [beach type] Barbie dolls.

Such comments attest to how settling-in is very much a two-way process. As discussed earlier, school communities may need to be better prepared for the arrival of students of refugee backgrounds and to consider how cultural differences may arise that affect these students' transition to schooling in Australia. The gendered nature of these differences may also need careful attention, demonstrating yet another level of complexity in relation to meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds.

A final point to raise in terms of the needs of students of refugee backgrounds relates to that of countering racism. Most of the executive interviewed for this project felt there was very little evidence of racism within their schools. As one principal remarked, whose school population had high numbers of LBOTE students and many of refugee backgrounds: "I think it is very hard for people to be racist because it is just, you know, everyone is from somewhere else so it is very difficult to do that." He added: "Sometimes the kids will throw the words out there but [it is] not racism. It is just normal behaviour that everyone does."

Such comments, however, leave their mark and accumulate, affecting those involved, with students generally more attuned to such incidents as is evident from the insights they provide in chapters 6 and 7. Racism, of course, may not be so overt; it may also take the form of excluding others, as was the case with the girls above that amounted to a reluctance to engage with others perceived as different affecting these students' involvement with their school community. These are issues that are dealt with in more detail in discussions with the teachers and students in later chapters.

In summarising the needs of students of refugee backgrounds, the various members of school executive identified a range of issues, foregrounding those associated

with aspects of health, wellbeing, disrupted schooling and EAL/D support. Their comments highlight not only the complex nature of these needs but also the ability of schools to address them with the issues facing students often compounded by those of their parents, some of which we now consider.

## The needs of parents of students of refugee backgrounds

Executive members involved in the project also considered the needs of many of the parents of students of refugee backgrounds in their schools drawing attention to the ways in which these affected their children. Of particular note was the social isolation they felt many experienced, which exacerbated the psychological trauma that parents as well as children were grappling with.

As the principal of Pulver PS pointed out: "Mental health, and all those things that as a school we don't have control over, they have such an impact on what goes on here at the school." Executive staff in other schools made similar comments and so sought various ways to ensure parents felt included within the school community. Many schools had office staff or school learning support officers who could act as interpreters, stressing the need for good communication with parents. Another principal referred to the need:

... build a rapport with families, which I reckon is essential for good learning for kids, because the parents have to feel comfortable coming along and think that they are going to be able to make their point and have a dialogue as opposed to struggle with English or whatever.

This was a view supported by an IEC deputy who commented that, "when the parents feel they are included, it rubs off on the kids as well". Other schools, with available funding, allocated staff to perform the time-consuming role of contacting parents with one principal explaining that:

The need here is getting parents and community into the school. So I changed the name of that role to Community Engagement Officer and recruited specifically for that role. So, our Community Engagement Officer is brilliant at getting our parents to come to the school. So we ring our parents and tell them the things that are on and invite them to come rather than what a lot of schools do, rely on a bit of paper for the students to take home ... so we actually call parents and invite them.

Few schools, however, could fund such a role but all endeavoured to have the parents of students of refugee backgrounds attend a range of events: parent information nights on aspects of schooling and curriculum, parent/teacher nights to discuss students' progress, welcome days and dinners, HSC survival sessions, the list goes on. Schools also saw their role as being much broader than this. Realising that social isolation was an issue for many parents, particularly for single mothers, those schools with large populations of students of refugee backgrounds organised a range of activities to assist parents to settle into Australia and to build their community networks.

The principal at Harperville HS explained what they offered. "We do lessons with parents. We have cooking lessons, visual arts lessons. They get in there and experience what it is like for kids." Another school ran a weekly afternoon tea for parents encouraging those of refugee backgrounds to attend and also a weekly playgroup for preschoolers on site. This principal also explained how they involved the Migrant Resource Centre to take parents on community excursions to visit parts of Sydney as a way of them making connections with others and gaining some familiarity of areas beyond the more immediate location where they had settled.

Such support, while important, demonstrates the broader remit of schools operating as key sites in building community and promoting a sense of belonging to assist newly arrived parents and their children. Such activities and

events, however, also involve considerable labour. While some schools could fund positions that assisted with their organisation, much of the responsibility was shouldered by school executive and teaching staff further adding to their duties within schools.

### Teacher capacity for meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds

In light of the additional responsibilities referred to above and coupled with the complexities of meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds in their classrooms, many executive referred to the stress this was placing upon teachers. Many were particularly concerned about the impact of trauma experienced by parents and students upon the teachers themselves.

One deputy explained that after a particularly difficult period following the huge influx of students of refugee backgrounds to the school that they arranged "self-help sessions for teachers. How to cope, how to deal with, you know, trauma ... some activities, exercises that people can do, meditation, all that stuff that is part of self-help".

There was a realisation that teachers also had to develop skills in dealing with traumatised children in their classes. Many had undertaken training organised through the NSW Department of Education and NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), such as the Safety, Trust, Attachment, Responsibility and Skills in Schools program and the much broader professional learning involved in Teaching Students from a Refugee Background that includes some training in EAL/D pedagogy.

These modules were generally highly rated as the principal of Pulver PS commented: "It's great training" but added "it only scratches the surface of what someone

really needs to understand of the refugee students that we teach here". This principal also referred to how he felt new teachers "are not prepared at all", which raises issues about initial teacher training in this area but also the preparedness of more experienced teachers who transfer to schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds.

Similar concerns were expressed by others, in particular around EAL/D pedagogy in the mainstream and the need for all teachers, K-12, to have a better grasp of the language and literacy needs of various key learning areas to assist students more effectively within their own classes.

IECs were acknowledged as centres of excellence around EAL/D pedagogy and refugee education, with one IEC deputy commenting: "My teachers are fantastic. The teachers here are first rate. They are highly qualified to deal with these students."

However, this expertise did not extend to all those in mainstream schools, especially those without EAL/D training but which had students of refugee backgrounds in their classrooms who were still grappling with the demands of academic English. As one principal commented in relation to his school, "they don't necessarily have the expertise," with another commenting: "The teachers feel a level of inadequacy around that [EAL/D pedagogy] and perhaps a level of uncertainty around how to engage the kids outside the normal standard strategies they use."

A senior executive member in another school with relatively high numbers of LBOTE students but few of refugee backgrounds felt her school simply lacked the required expertise.

Everyone is keen but we feel that we don't have an expert team person to support us ...

we try to be experts in all different areas but to have someone that focuses on this area you know that would be great.

School executive also raised the issue of how to strike a balance, in teaching students of refugee backgrounds, between meeting their extensive pastoral needs, especially those associated with psychological trauma, and their academic needs, ensuring the delivery of a rigorous curriculum. Such concerns were raised by executive in both primary and secondary schools. One high school principal, for example, commented: "I have been where there are great welfare programs and all the rest of that stuff but really, the teaching is pretty ordinary." Two primary executive had similar views with the first explaining:

I think that when we are dealing with our students one-on-one and we start to hear and get to know them more and hear the history of where they have come from and their trauma, there can be a bit of a tendency to make excuses for them not improving academically and as strongly as they could and ... I am going to use the word "pity" like there can be an element not from all teachers but from some teachers.

Another primary school executive member also framed this issue in terms of teacher expectations.

The perception is that it takes 18 months [to settle] and so you really can't expect too much from them in 18 months. And the problem with that is not only does it lower the expectations with that current teacher but it invents under-achievement because the teacher of the first year has that expectation based on whatever grade it is ... So it is striking that balance between wellbeing as welfare and wellbeing as self-esteem and achievement.

This imbalance between the pastoral and the academic manifested itself in other ways such as the acceptance of an overuse of students' first language in classrooms. This was mainly the case with Arabic given the large number of students arriving from Syria and Iraq. One principal saw "no negatives" with this practice, feeling it reduced students' sense of dislocation, but

it may also retard their speed in acquiring English. First language maintenance is important for the acquisition of another language but, as an IEC deputy explained:

Sometimes it is the easy way out for the kids and we do say to [the] teachers 'discourage the use of Arabic in your class'. And we speak to the [school learning support officer] as well and say please refrain from providing the answers to the students. We have guidelines for them. If a student asks a question or if a teacher asks what is the meaning of a word don't give it to them straight away, let the student use some context clues to work it out if they can.

In fact, this deputy referred to how some students decided not to enrol at their local TAFE after leaving school "because they wanted an environment where there were less Arabic-speaking students so they would be forced to practice their English". Achieving the right balance between the pastoral and the academic is important and may require a stronger focus in considering how best to meet the needs of students of refugee backgrounds in schools.

Addressing these students' competing needs, however, is not simply resolved by teachers developing the required expertise through professional learning. As one principal remarked:

We're expecting more of our teachers; we are expecting them to deal with more. We are giving them more resources but we are not giving them the time to process all that and to actually make meaning out of what is going on.

## The forms of support that teachers and schools need

The various executive members in the 10 schools involved in the Mapping the Educational Experiences of Refugee Students (MEERS) project nominated different ways in which teachers in their schools could be better supported in meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds and their families. Many

spoke of the need for more counselling support. Given the trauma experienced by students in one school the principal felt, "we should have a full-time counsellor". In another school the principal indicated that they needed "a lot more" as the counselling allocation was insufficient to meet the demand with time mainly spent on "assessment and then making recommendations and reports". This principal pointed out: "There is no counselling; he doesn't have the time for that."

Many schools praised the support they received from the Department of Education refugee support leaders yet were concerned by the short-term nature of the positions. Schools with very few students of refugee backgrounds, however, had not heard of this role and the support they provided nor were they aware of the Department's professional learning materials about refugees or support available through external agencies such as Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors. Such knowledge was more apparent in schools with larger numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, but these gaps in understanding in other schools need to be addressed. As one executive member in one such school commented:

I mean it may only be one child but then that one child if we don't teach them the right way by identifying their needs I think we are hurting them, you know, we are destroying their life. Where, if we had an expert to come in and say, "You know what, these are some great strategies that we can help you with", that would be great.

While refugee support leaders possess such knowledge, as they are based in schools, they tend to lack the profile of centrally based personnel as was the case with the previous NSW Department of Education English as a Second Language/Multicultural Education consultancy that was disbanded in 2012 following the introduction of the policy of Local Schools, Local Decisions.

Many executives were critical of this move and regretted the impact of the loss of expertise and support that the consultancy provided to schools. One executive member, passionate about the role they performed, commented on the demise of the consultancy at length, referring to it as:

Fucking idiotic. Completely idiotic. You know ... what are we supposed to do? There is no guidance, there is no, you know, we are sailing around in our own kind of boat here. We try, well we do, we actively get guidance from academics, you know, but the value and consistency of what the consultancy provided has gone. You know, nobody is a bloody expert now ... principals make their own decisions about ... it is crap, complete crap. There has been such a loss of knowledge and professional expertise ... so, swear words come to mind.

Clearly the refugee support leaders were appointed to fill this void but their specific brief to provide support in meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds in particular areas not only tends to neglect schools with fewer numbers of students of refugee backgrounds but a broader remit of ensuring teachers in all schools have the necessary understanding for working in school environments of increasing cultural complexity. One principal said: "One of the great things that the Department introduced last year was the Refugee Support Team and in working with them, it was quite evident that staff have that understanding, staff have an empathy and that is just great but we need to go deeper than that." He felt much more was required, despite the best efforts of his staff:

They only have a certain number of experts so a lot of what we do is hit and miss and unfortunately, it's the intensity of what we need that they are not getting so we are just finding that we are just slowly kicking the can down the road.

## Support from external organisations

Many schools were also able to access support for their students of refugee backgrounds and their families from a range of different external providers. Representatives of these organisations offered their accounts of their involvement with schools in the previous chapter. Here school executives provide their perspectives on this support.

A number of organisations were referred to by the executive members who were interviewed that offered a range of different services: refugee health support; youth organisations that involved students in drumming workshops; community groups that funded excursions and camps for students. The organisation that was probably referred to most often, however, was Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). Many schools made use of its services to assist with the psychological trauma that many students and their parents were experiencing. As one high school principal explained: "Look, the best organisation that we have dealt with is STARTTS. They are very good in terms of their counselling with the kids and in terms of how they communicate with us."

Many schools relied on STARTTS to fill the gaps in their own capacity to provide counselling to their students of refugee backgrounds but had issues with the time involved in liaising and establishing relationships with external agencies such as STARTTS.

One principal commented: "There is good information exchange with them but that took a long time to develop and a lot of energy from our learning support team."

Another executive member elsewhere explained how schools had to be quite discerning in the way they used the support provided by STARTTS and other organisations because,

The agencies have so much money; they just want to throw everything at it. And so that, I believe that, has become a problem. So, we have become more strategic about it. So, thank-you very much but that is not what we need. This is what we need. What are you going to do to meet this need?

Another principal raised concerns about the level of support students received following a change in service provider.

So with [the agency] we had a really great relationship and with [another agency] since they have taken over their contact, there are quite a few new people we are working with and it is a little different I am thinking they don't have that greater level of support.

Clearly, these different agencies can provide invaluable assistance to schools in meeting a range of these students and their parents' needs, in particular, around counselling support and welfare needs but the time involved in coordinating this and ensuring the support is well targeted becomes yet another responsibility for schools.

### What can the NSW Teachers Federation do to support teachers and schools in the education of students of refugee backgrounds?

While executive staff in schools referred to a number of ways in which the NSW Teachers Federation could assist them to better support students of refugee backgrounds their suggestions fell into two broad areas:

- i. developing professional learning materials especially for staff in high schools and those in schools with lower numbers of students of refugee backgrounds
- ii. advocacy around better funding and increased staffing allocations for EAL/D and support staff.

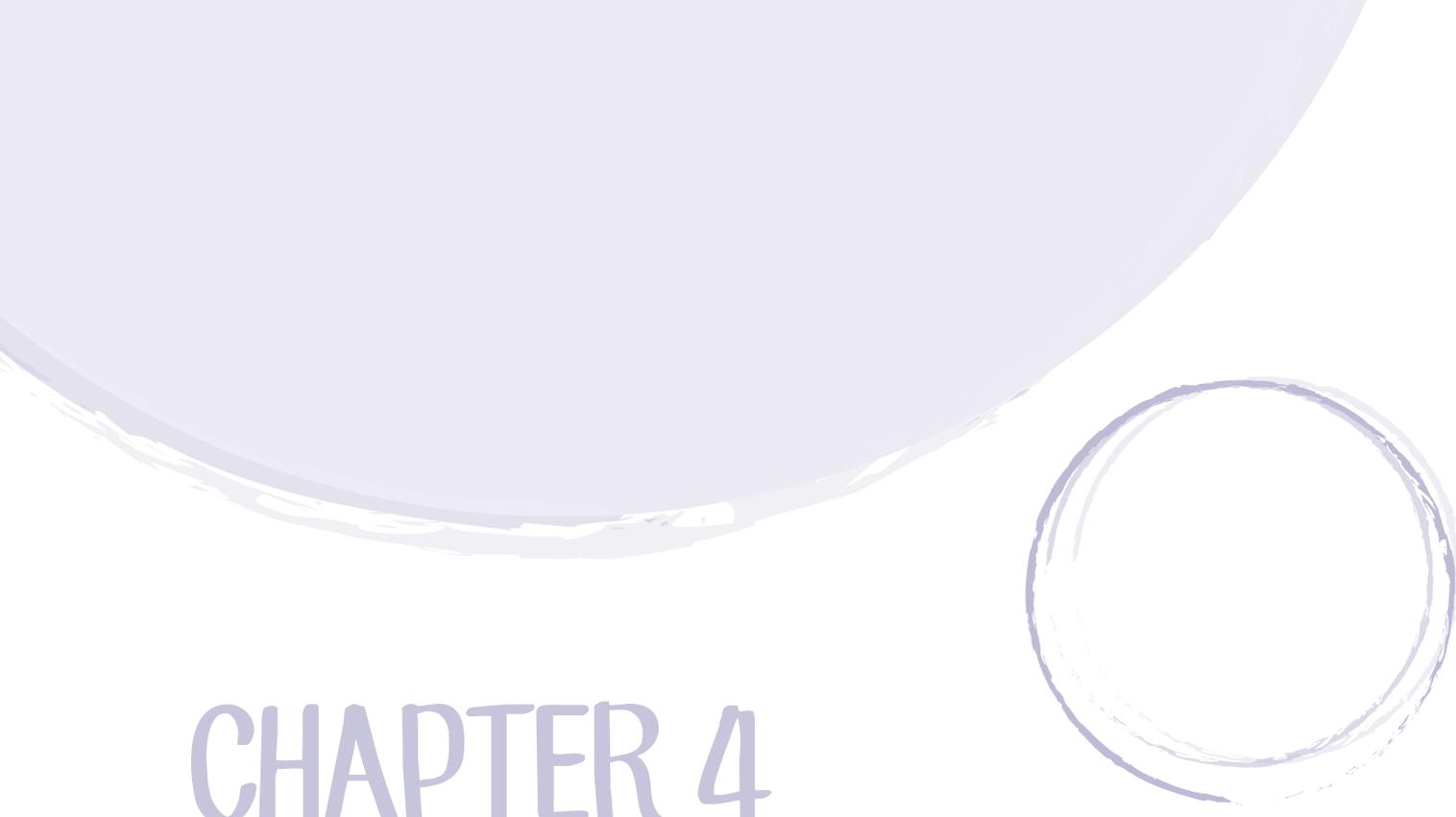
One principal summed this up as:

I think the Federation has two things, two areas. One is definitely professional learning and working with not just schools like us which has a high proportion of refugee students,

but also those schools that only have maybe five or six or seven, how to help them with the students that they have. I think it is important to differentiate between those two groups. And even to facilitate sharing between schools like ours with schools that don't have a lot of refugee students but just, you know, understanding what the issues are for those students. I think the other role for Federation is to make sure that they keep advocating for refugee kids, for non-English speaking background kids, because there is always this competition between where the funding goes and I think it is important to realise that the area of refugee education needs to maintain its funding and keep getting funded because that is not always guaranteed and a lot of people don't even know what an IEC is. And even within the Education Department you talk about the IEC and then they go, "What's that?" So, then you have got to explain all of that and they have no understanding about it.

### Conclusion

The executive staff of these 10 different schools provided invaluable insight into the various needs of their students of refugee backgrounds and those of their families, together with detailing the ways in which their schools were addressing these needs. Their accounts attest to the complexity of the school environments in which they work and the ways in which their schools now have a vastly expanded role of not only addressing the educational needs of these students — which are themselves complex — but also offering a range of services and community support to assist them and their families to settle in Australia. Taking on such a role has implications for schools, not least of which is how to balance the competing needs of these students with those of others within their school community. Public schools shoulder considerable responsibility for the settlement of refugees and, while these executive have raised issues around the support they provide, there is no doubting the value and commitment of what they do.



# CHAPTER 4

## The perspectives of teachers on the education of students of refugee backgrounds

In this chapter we turn to a focus on the perspectives of teachers regarding the needs of students of refugee backgrounds and how they feel these needs are being met. We also consider the extent to which teachers feel they have the required expertise to support these students and what the implications are for teachers working in such complex school environments. Here we draw on data from focus groups with teachers, undertaken in each of the 10 schools involved in the project together with interviews with another three teachers working as refugee support leaders who provide assistance to various networks of schools in the area of refugee education. There is also some use of the observational data from classrooms to exemplify aspects of practice around EAL/D pedagogy and where improvements could be made. While here we cover some similar territory to that considered by school executive in the previous chapter, especially around the needs of students of refugee backgrounds, different needs are also explored together with other issues of specific relevance to teachers. These are:

- the complex needs of students of refugee backgrounds
- issues associated with the teaching of students of refugee backgrounds
- the expertise of teachers working with students of refugee backgrounds
- issues around workload and the health and wellbeing of teachers of students of refugee backgrounds
- how the NSW Teachers Federation can support teachers and schools in the education of students of refugee backgrounds.

### The complex needs of students of refugee backgrounds

#### The welfare needs of students of refugee backgrounds

The teachers across each of the 10 schools spoke of students of refugee backgrounds having similar needs to those referred to by school executive, in particular, those associated with psychological trauma, disrupted schooling and the acquisition of English language and literacy. What was

distinctive about the teachers' comments, however, was their focus on the complex and highly individualised nature of these needs. For example, a teacher in one primary school referred to how:

I have had students who come in to year 2 who have never been to school, never been in a classroom, so their experience was very different. They had experienced a lot of violence. And then I have had students who haven't really experienced a lot of violence but they are refugees and they have come across but they have been oblivious to what has actually gone on. So I think it depends on what experiences they actually have as to how well they settle.

Another teacher in the same school also spoke of the variable nature of these students' needs.

I look at what students I have got this year, what are the needs of the students this year? That is where I am going to focus. And then next year it could be totally different ... I have got a student at the moment and I had one previously who is a selective mute, so I have been working closely with [Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors] and our learning and support teacher.

The range of trauma-related issues among the students of refugee backgrounds was also commented on by one of the high school teachers. "So you know they come in through different visas and not all refugee students experience trauma. They have some sort of dislocation and other types of issues but the severity of the trauma varies quite dramatically between individuals", adding "all refugee students struggle but struggle in different ways. We have very capable students — students that have, you know, not as much capacity to learn as others. And some are very bright, a full range of learners". A teacher at Humbervale HS explained how there may also be considerable variation within the one family.

Even siblings can have a really different level of schooling and life experiences and things like that. So, I guess it just comes down to really understanding each student and trying

to provide that different teaching and support; it is always going to be different, it is that kind of targeted personalised support.

Many teachers also stressed the need to be careful about the label "refugee" and making assumptions about students' capabilities on the basis of this. A teacher in another school drew on her own experience as a refugee to explain this point.

I think that it is quite dangerous to make a group stand out and, you know, brand them and having a refugee background myself ... the point is you want to move forward, you don't want to walk around with a Post-It note on your head ... "I need special treatment".

Given this, there was reference to how some students resisted psychological support or any involvement in refugee-related activities. As one teacher explained:

Yeah, we have had programs designed around kids sort of talking about their history and their past and we have had students opt out of those programs because they don't want to talk about the past, they don't want to talk about that experience so much. They rather enjoy being here.

A colleague made a similar point. "They don't want to be thinking about what happened in some world, or you know, what they have seen. They don't need to be reminded, that is. Every day, it is in their minds."

Such comments attest to the complexity of meeting these students' needs and the importance of support that is individually tailored. Psychological counselling, for example, may be of benefit to many but such approaches may not be needed in all cases and may even prove counter-productive for some, as these teachers indicate. Such specialised support, however, is dependent upon careful assessment, which, with the exception of 200 Visa holders, may be left up to schools and teachers to decide. This is suggestive of the need for greater counselling support within schools that would provide assistance in making this determination. As one primary

school teacher remarked: “How can we teach a child if you don’t know who they are or what they have come from or where they have come from or why they have come.”

Yet, in some cases, teachers are not given this information. This is more often the case in schools with very low numbers of refugees whose enrolment processes may not necessarily capture this information or make it available to teachers. In one school, for example, in discussion with staff about one particular student, a teacher commented: “I didn’t even know she was a refugee until I got told in this meeting.” It was information this teacher said would have been useful given “she is a very emotional child”. In another school, a teacher made a similar comment: “I would have liked to know a little bit more before they just turned up and were like, this is the student.” In this case, it was a child with considerable behavioural issues most likely resulting from experiences of trauma.

While certain information may need to be kept confidential, ensuring teachers are suitably briefed about students’ refugee backgrounds would seem a first step towards ascertaining the students’ needs and having programs in place to support them. It would also encourage teachers with students who have experienced trauma to be vigilant of possible triggers of this trauma within their classrooms. As one teacher explained: “I think it is important to avoid presenting things that could be a trigger for trauma ... like a writing stimulus. We could avoid these things, or if we know a lot about their background or their country or what the country was like, we might be more aware that it might trigger something.”

### The EAL/D needs of students of refugee backgrounds

While teachers tended to highlight the individualised nature of these students’ needs they also expressed a common

concern regarding their English language and literacy proficiency. In one IEC, for example, a teacher commented that:

The key is literacy. I mean there are huge welfare needs that we have here and we support them through ... but it is the literacy that will hold them back. For me, the students with broken schooling ... getting here and hoping to get a job or hoping to make their way through TAFE or into university, there is so much work, there is so much catching up to do. I think the welfare needs we meet quite well and the literacy needs we meet as well as possible. But, their biggest deficiency is just their ability, for a lot of them, to read and write in their first language and for those who do, reading any sort of level, academic level, in English, is such a difficult task.

Much of the discussion of English language and literacy acquisition, in terms of high school-aged students, centred around the length of time spent in IECs, the process of transition into mainstream high schools and the ability of schools to ensure that students received the EAL/D support they needed. One IEC teacher commented on the gap between approaches to teaching in an IEC compared with mainstream classes.

What we do here is more primary-based and then when they go into the high school the requirements, the syllabus requirements, are way too much and they just get lost in the high school classes. I think there just needs to be more communication, more programs, yeah, to bridge the IEC and the high school.

While recognising these gaps, a teacher in another IEC felt that students “can’t stay in the IEC forever”, with a colleague adding “if we don’t get kids out into the mainstream, they may never take that step”. Generally, there was consensus among IEC staff, however, that better transition processes were required. As one IEC teacher explained: “Sometimes it is very hard for the high school to understand where they are coming from, the kids.” These teachers saw major differences between transition processes in high schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds and those with very few.

If we are talking about high schools with a big cohort of refugees, they often have programs and they welcome them with open arms and they have got buddies for them that are appropriate. If you are talking about a school that doesn't have many they are just sort of like "Oh good, you're here. Here is the booklet; here is your timetable, off you go luvvie".

Without the appropriate procedures in place to ensure students are welcomed into the mainstream and their language and literacy needs are well supported, many flounder. As one IEC teacher commented:

Watching them fall through the cracks is heartbreaking. It is horrible sending the kids to high school knowing that they are still struggling to form sentences. It is just the most devastating thing in the world because you just know that they are going to go and you don't know what is going to happen but you know it is not going to be good.

There are those who also have difficulty navigating different expectations around behaviour in IECs as compared with mainstream high schools. Another IEC teacher commented that:

They are often put in the bottom classes [in the high school] because their marks are going to be low ... where there is a lot of behavioural issues ... But they are shocked and appalled by the behaviour that they are seeing in the high schools, and scared, and they can't follow the language so they are more scared. They don't, they don't want to open their mouths, then they come back and they say, "Do not send me there ... I am not going there".

Of course, this may not be the experience of all students. Many do make a smooth transition and may excel. As mentioned, their experiences are highly individual, but such comments indicate there is room for improvement with both IEC and mainstream teachers offering different suggestions as to what this might entail. For one IEC teacher it involved more time in IECs.

I think, realistically, what we need is not more preparation time or more networking with high schools. It is just students need more than five terms to learn English to a level they can

survive. Even in year 7, our best students, if the first ones who leave us have like a year 6 level of English, we are lucky.

For an EAL/D teacher in a high school, however, much had to do with where students were placed on entering the mainstream. As she explained: "There is no way we would put a kid into mainstream classes immediately straight from the IEC; it is sort of a no-brainer for us." She also stressed the importance of exit reports that IECs prepared on students transitioning into mainstream high schools in terms of determining the level and kind of EAL/D support they should receive.

In schools that had sizeable numbers of students of refugee backgrounds transferring from an IEC, bridging classes proved to be quite effective in easing students' transition into the mainstream. These classes, if available, tended to be for senior students not yet ready for the demands of an HSC curriculum. As one high school teacher at Harperville explained:

I feel like the bridging concept works quite well with the senior students and I wonder if there was a possibility we could have something with the junior students ... I would imagine that it we could have some sort of a staged class or maybe like a Stage 4, a Stage 5, and they could be grouped as a bridging concept and have 7 and 8 together like a bridging for them ... and students who were progressing really well, we could move them into the mainstream from that class.

The actual timing of transition into the mainstream was also widely discussed as one high school teacher commented: "I wish that they could all start at the beginning of the year; just one less thing, less disruption, to worry about." Other teachers provided some insight into the nature of this disruption and its impact on not only the students transferring but also on those already there.

Like when they come into a classroom, it is a new environment and sometimes we can forget to show them the routine. We forget that because they do come in term 2 and term

3 and we have already established that routine with all our classes and for us to say, take a week to try and get that routine all over again, it is a setback for us.

Another teacher commented on the way in which the transition of students from IECs into the mainstream led to the displacement of other students who had to move to accommodate more recent arrivals.

So, part of our role is to decide which students are ready to move up to the next level and it is, you know, it is really challenging because ... teachers are frustrated and with this huge turnover of students. Like you will have 10 new students coming into a class for instance and then you have to move 10 students out to another class and those students have only just arrived from the IEC maybe last term. So ... while we are trying our best, it is just becoming this situation where you have really like up to 60 kids in each year group who need high support and ... it's really challenging to make those decisions while this person — they are now ready to move one, but they are not really. But there is nowhere to put them. Trying to get kids in a class where they are supported for their language needs and then also the added issues of building rapport and making sure that they have a smooth transition, if you are moving kids from class to class every term that's not a smooth transition.

There are huge logistical issues in the ongoing transfer of students from IECs into mainstream high schools but the current process whereby this occurs on a term basis seems far too disruptive for all involved; unsettling existing classroom routines, increasing the likelihood that difficulties will arise for those transitioning and the premature transfer of students from high support EAL/D classes to make way for new arrivals. While limiting transition to an annual intake, as suggested above, may not be feasible, semesterising transition may be a better option than what currently exists.

Such a proposal was advanced by teachers in one of the high schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds with one commenting: “The bi-annual entry of students from IECs would be a great idea as opposed

to every quarter.” Changes of this type, however, would necessitate greater flexibility regarding students' length of stay within IECs with a possible increase to six terms, in some cases, to ensure the transfer of students only occurred biannually. Increasing the flexibility of transfer arrangements from IECs into the mainstream was a recommendation of Hammond (2014) in her report to the NSW Department of Education on transition processes, and so, making such a determination seems long overdue. Hammond's report was also written prior to the increased intake of Syrian refugees in 2016 and the broader escalation of refugee numbers in NSW schools suggesting an even greater need for such changes.

These issues are more of a concern for high schools in metropolitan areas and, in particular, those with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds. Different issues around EAL/D support emerge in high schools with low numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, those in regional areas and also primary schools. For high schools with low numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, finding and funding the appropriate EAL/D support can be difficult. This was the case with one of the schools in this study that relied on the expertise of a learning and support teacher to assist students who indicated the short-term nature of this support was insufficient. This teacher referred to one student who was still experiencing difficulties. “When it is a bit hard I think she, so half-way she gives up and then she says, ‘It is so hard’.” Such students are absorbed into the mainstream where their language and literacy issues tend to receive little attention with mainstream teachers focusing on subject content often with little understanding of how to cater for their EAL/D needs and with little or no support available within these schools to assist them.

In regional areas, where there is no access to an IEC, students of refugee backgrounds

will also need to be catered for within mainstream schools. With sufficient numbers, it may be possible to establish intensive English classes, as was the case in one of the schools involved in this study, but teachers still spoke of ongoing issues for these students once they entered the mainstream. As one explained: “The teacher will be speaking English at a certain speed and they will wonder, ‘Oh, what’s going on here?’.”

With increasing numbers of students of refugee backgrounds in NSW schools, there is now even greater demand for EAL/D support. Those schools with the required “critical mass” of students may be better placed to provide this support through intensive English or bridging classes prior to entry into mainstream classes, but it seems even in these circumstances far more is needed to ensure all teachers have the required training to support these students’ English language and literacy needs once they enter the mainstream. As one refugee support leader remarked: “We want the Department to make it clear that EAL/D-type methodology is appropriate across the curriculum.” This is not at the expense of specialist EAL/D teachers, whose role is crucial in the initial stages of students acquiring English language and literacy, but to ensure their work is then reinforced and extended within mainstream classes allowing students to continue to progress.

Similar issues are evident in primary schools that must cater for all students within the mainstream given IECs are only available for high school-aged students. Once again, if there are sufficient numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, schools may be able to provide intensive English classes before students transition to the mainstream, as was the case with some schools in this study. Whether or not this is the case, it is still considered important for all teachers to develop a better understanding of EAL/D pedagogy as this will not only enhance their professional conversations with the

EAL/D teachers with whom they work but will allow them to better support students when that assistance is no longer available. Of course, in some schools with limited numbers, such support is never an option and EAL/D students must be catered for within the mainstream, providing an even stronger imperative for all teachers to develop this expertise.

Another area of concern that teachers raised around EAL/D support was the lack of time available for EAL/D and mainstream teachers to consult and appropriately program to ensure individual student’s language and literacy needs were being met. As one high school teacher commented:

Often the KLA [key learning area] teachers, actually in all cases, the KLA teachers don’t have time to sit with the EAL/D teachers to say, “Look this is what we need to work on,” so, that puts stress on us and of course the EAL/D teachers just have to work on their feet really to figure out what’s happening. So, I think an allocated period allowance for teachers around this would be good.

Without this, the capacity for EAL/D and mainstream teachers to work effectively together seems severely constrained. Time for such planning would allow the benefits of tuition during class time to be maximised and the English language and literacy needs of students of refugee backgrounds to be much better supported within mainstream classrooms.

### Teachers’ perspectives on racism towards students of refugee backgrounds

The teacher focus groups were also asked to consider the extent to which racism was an issue for students of refugee backgrounds. As with many of the executive who were interviewed, most teachers also felt that racism was not a problem in their schools. One primary school teacher, for example, commented that, “in terms of students being racist to other students

who have come to our school, I haven't experienced it on the playground. I haven't seen it in my classroom."

The cultural diversity of the student population in this school was considered the chief reason for this, as the teacher explained: "I think it helps that, you know, a lot of our students are from a different background but with similar experience. I definitely could see it happening if there was a bit more of a divide in our school." Cultural diversity, however, is no guarantee against racism. In another primary school with slightly different demographics, but which was still quite culturally diverse, teachers felt the few refugee students of African backgrounds were probably experiencing difficulties given they were noticeably different from other students.

They are so much darker and they have got that really African hair and so they really stand out against the rest ... a lot of turbans and a lot of hijabs, things like that. So those children are finding that ... even with all the differences, they are still different. Very different in the way in which they stand out.

Teachers in a couple of other schools referred to religious differences creating problems among students. One primary school teacher explained:

I have had issues with students from the same cultural background but different religious beliefs actually get into physical altercations with each other, you know, because one was Muslim and the other was Catholic and then I have also had students ask me, "Which one do you think is best?", "Which religion is better?" So they are very conscious of it.

In yet another school, with a predominantly Anglo-Australian student population, and which a small number of refugee students of African backgrounds attended, a teacher referred to other students making racist taunts in the form of "back door kind of comments". The teacher explained how students will say, "So, they are asking for a black pen, like they will disguise the racism

and emphasise certain things like, 'Can I have a *black* pen?' or something like that. Whereas I shut that down immediately."

Each of these comments, and a number of others not recorded here, are suggestive of an underlying racial or religious intolerance in some schools. They provide further evidence, when combined with that considered in chapter 3, that the ability of students of refugee backgrounds to settle and develop a sense of belonging is dependent upon school communities as a whole. It is not simply a matter of these students "fitting in" but how school communities embrace new arrivals, particularly those perceived as "very different".

It also requires all teachers and students to not only develop a better understanding of the refugee experience but also of the cultural complexity of the contemporary world and the way in which this is realised within local contexts wherein schools operate as "micro-publics" (Amin, 2002) reflective of broader global dynamics. The professional task of teachers is to make such knowledge accessible for students, and so, from the early years of school, they begin to understand their place in the world and the global community of which they are a part. The "differences" that students may observe are simply a function of this and it is the role of schools to assist them to navigate these and to promote forms of respectful engagement, which are the foundation of peaceful coexistence within civil societies.

Many teachers spoke of the importance of having "cultural understanding" but understood what this meant in very different ways. One high school teacher conceived of it as, "empathy, some understanding of where they have come from, as well, and appreciation, as well, of where they have come from and what they actually bring". This last point, wherein cultural understanding is viewed as a form of celebrating difference, was also the view

of one of the refugee support leaders. “How do you ensure that you are celebrating the culture and how do you ensure that when the books that you choose have got some, you know, are celebrating other cultures?” Another refugee support leader focused more on cultural understanding as a knowledge of students’ countries of origin and the circumstances that forced them to leave.

I think [teachers] need to know a little bit about the country background of the place students have come from. I mean it is complex ... to be a bit aware of not only “Oh yeah, they are Muslim” but I think we do need deeper understanding.

These teachers’ conceptions of “cultural background” vary enormously. Those that foreground empathy and cultural appreciation view it more in psychological or moral terms, i.e. “I understand where you are coming from”. Whereas others that focus on knowledge of these students’ backgrounds are using “understanding” in an intellectual sense allowing them to critically reflect upon the socio-political contexts that have shaped, and continue to shape, these students’ experience. While both forms of understanding are valuable, without the latter, namely an intellectual examination of “culture”, the deeper understanding the second refugee support leader refers to is largely neglected.

Such understanding is most often gleaned from professional learning but when teachers were asked how they acquired this “knowledge”, they generally referred to more everyday sources of information or simply viewed it as a by-product of teaching in culturally diverse contexts. As one explained: “I would have really liked to be able to get more information last year but I only had Google.” Another teacher said: “Oh, the kids tell us. They like to share. For example, if we have lots of kids away, I have kids who will tell me it’s, I don’t know, a cultural day, so I am not going to be here.”

In another school a teacher simply remarked: “I think you are so immersed in it that you would have to be really stupid not to be able to see what is appropriate culturally and what is not.” Such forms of information acquired in the course of teaching, however, are very “hit and miss” and are not a reliable substitute for the professional knowledge that should inform teachers’ practice. While substantial professional learning around teaching students of refugee backgrounds is available, such comments indicate there may be gaps in content, particularly around a critical interrogation of cultural understanding and how this might be applied in teaching students of refugee backgrounds in various contexts.

### The expertise of teachers working with students of refugee backgrounds

Much of the data that informs this report is drawn from interviews and focus groups. Field notes of observations in playgrounds, classrooms and some community events were also compiled but the main intent of collecting this data was to contribute in a more general way to the broad mapping of the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds and, where applicable, to exemplify trends rather than to offer detailed analysis. Such is the case here with the observations of two EAL/D lessons, one in an intensive English class in a primary school and another in a high school.

The intensive English primary school class occurred each day during the two-hour morning session, after which students returned to the mainstream. This class was attended by a range of refugee students who were in years 3 to 6 and from various backgrounds: Syrian, Iraqi and Ethiopian. Some were relatively recent arrivals, others had been in Australia for almost a year. Their EAL/D needs were varied as well. Some had relatively good spoken English,

for others it was quite stilted. Their written English was also variable; some displayed difficulty forming letters, yet to habituate English script and use of a pencil, while there were some students who displayed a greater facility for writing. Together with the teacher, here referred to as Doreen, who had previously worked in the mainstream but for a number of years had taken on the responsibility of the EAL/D class, there was an Arabic-speaking school learning support officer, who provided assistance.

On this day, a Friday, nine students attended the class; a number of others were involved in activities elsewhere in the school. This particular morning session involved four different activities: a word bingo activity, a maths bingo activity, a word-family task and an activity around the theme of rubbish in the environment. The word bingo activity had been set-up prior to the students arriving with word cards and discs on each desk. As Doreen called out the words, placing each in a sentence to explain its meaning and then writing the word on a whiteboard, students had to see if they could locate them on their bingo cards. As the activity progressed Doreen also quizzed students about some of the words or asked them to place them in sentences as well. This was quite a lengthy activity with what seemed like an ad hoc list of sight words of various grammatical categories: pronouns, verbs prepositions and adverbs. After 30 minutes, one student called out “bingo”, having covered all of his words with discs, and when Doreen was satisfied these were correct, he was awarded a prize.

This was followed by maths bingo, which involved Doreen asking students a range of maths questions, recording the correct answers on the whiteboard, which had been cleared of the words from the previous activity, and students then attempting to find these answers among the various numbers on their maths bingo cards. After

20 minutes, another boy called out “bingo” and was awarded a prize when all his answers proved correct.

Doreen then progressed to the word-family activity with students completing a worksheet on words ending with “ink”, after these had first been discussed using animated examples shown on the class smartboard. In the final 40 minutes of the morning session, Doreen held a discussion with the class about rubbish in the environment. She displayed various images on the smartboard, such as a rubbish dump, and had objects, such as a book made from recycled materials and re-usable shopping bags, for stimulus. The main task, however, was for students to categorise a range of items shown on a worksheet in terms of their capacity to be reused, recycled, reduced or composted.

There was little discussion of these quite complex terms and a number of the students were a little confused as some of the images on the worksheet seemed to have little relevance to the activity such as a peace sign and a heart symbol, though these were never mentioned, and Doreen did not circulate around the room to offer guidance. The school learning support officer spent most of her time assisting one student who was clearly a beginner and required extra guidance. Most students “finished” just before the bell at 11am, cleaned up and left the room at different intervals. There was no feedback or further discussion of the activity and there was no indication it was part of a continuing unit of work.

It was quite clear that these students’ needs were complex. They were operating with varying command of English language and literacy and so teaching them required considerable expertise and a degree of personalised attention. The students here appeared to enjoy the class and there was a genuine rapport with the teacher but the series of activities they undertook seemed to lack coherence and the required

structure to address their needs. There was no obvious development from previous lessons and an ad hoc treatment of words, their meanings and grammatical categories. Considerable emphasis was placed on fun and activity but the lesson lacked the “high intellectual challenge” that Hammond et al. (2018) call for within EAL/D classrooms.

The lack of guidance and apparent confusion of some students was very much evident in the case of Perry, a Stage 2 student of African background, who had been in Australia for almost a year. Perry sat at the side of the classroom on his own and appeared easily distracted; he often called out and was sometimes ignored. This was most obvious during the word-family activity when he had difficulty placing the “ink” words — link, drink, wink, rink and sink — in alphabetical order on a worksheet. With no response from Doreen, Perry turned to one of the researchers for help who asked him questions about letter order, recited the alphabet to him, as Perry ‘mouthed’ along, assisting him with the answers. In this exchange, Perry seemed focused and had some success but was unable to finish before Doreen moved onto the next activity.

To some extent there was a stronger focus on providing more personalised attention and support in the high school intensive English class, which was attended by six students, four of whom were Syrian refugees, one a Chinese international student and, another, a recent Italian migrant. This was a one and a quarter hour senior Science class of Stage 5 and 6 students with varying command of English. Most had been in the class for at least a couple of months. Their teacher, Alice, a recent graduate in her second year, had a Science background but no formal Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) training. In this particular lesson, the focus was on vocabulary used in a science experiment drawn from a video the class had watched.

This was the third lesson in a unit examining the content, structure and language of procedures. Alice briefly discussed the experiment with the class asking students to recall aspects of the previous lesson and focusing on key aspects of vocabulary. She spoke clearly and slowly with repetition and then wrote the procedure on the board. Following this, she returned to examine the words in more detail, i.e. test tube, rack, light, match etc, having students repeat each after her before then asking them to write the words in their books as she circulated around the room to check their work. Students were clearly engaged in the lesson and were applying themselves to the task with Alice having used techniques of recall and repetition to reinforce points and highlight aspects of the vocabulary.

Following this, however, the lesson turned to an examination of the grammatical categories of each word where Alice was in less familiar territory. She began quizzing students about whether the words they had written were nouns or verbs but created some confusion over a number of words that could be either depending on their usage and, in fact, could also have been used as adjectives. This was the case with “light”, for example, which in the procedure was used as a verb. One student, however, pointed to the light on the ceiling, which Alice acknowledged was a light but failed to clarify that in this case it was a thing, a noun and not a verb.

The confusion continued when Alice distributed a list of 32 words to categorise and a worksheet with a table on which students had to group the words into class (noun, verb, adjective) and specific form (noun of place, etc). One student, however, was grappling with the problem of trying to decide whether “match” as a noun was a place or a thing. Some “things” were also noun phrases rather than single words and some were singular and some were plural. Also, there had been no discussion of adjectives, even though there was a column

for these on the table. As the class made an attempt to complete the task, Alice gave the Syrian students permission to write in Arabic. This was a language that she did not speak, and while the use of a first language can aid the acquisition of a second, it was unclear how Alice was then going to check these students' work. This, however, was not discussed and as the class was yet to finish the table when the bell sounded, the feedback on the activity was held over until their next lesson.

While this lesson started well with Alice using various strategies to augment these students' vocabulary, her rudimentary knowledge of grammar limited her ability to explain the different functions of language, important in students' writing and comprehension of English. Alice, however, is not alone in this regard. Other teachers indicated grammar was an area in which they lacked expertise. As one young teacher explained: "I think coming from university so recently, we are not prepared for this kind of setting. We do one semester of a [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages] subject and that is it." She referred to the additional work required to develop such expertise.

So I came in and just kind of threw myself into every single learning opportunity that I had. But I think that there is a bigger onus on us as the staff to do that in our own time. And a lot of the preparation that we have is, it is not, it is something that we have to pursue ourselves. So, if you don't have the time or perhaps, you know, have things that limit you from being able to do these extra-curricular learning activities, it could be very difficult.

One of her more experienced colleagues referred to his own lack of expertise around grammar on entering the profession.

I felt very unprepared when I started. I think the language side of my teaching, I didn't feel

super confident in all the language and all the grammar which I needed to have, and it took me a good few years of doing a lot of reading.

Clearly, this is an area that needs far more attention within initial teacher education and also in teachers' continuing professional learning, not simply to acquire knowledge of English grammar but how to apply it in the teaching of language and literacy across the curriculum. Calls to improve teachers' expertise in this area are nothing new but with increasingly complex student populations in both urban and rural areas, where English is an additional language for many, it is now essential expertise for all those within the teaching profession.

## Teacher workload and stress

Developing the required expertise to teach students of refugee backgrounds and to assist them and their families to settle in Australia, involves time-consuming and emotional labour. Much of this work is undertaken on top of teachers' existing teaching loads and responsibilities. In chapter 3, executive staff referred to the various roles that schools and teachers had assumed as they endeavour to meet the needs of these students and their families. Teachers provided similar accounts of these extra duties. In one primary school, a learning and support teacher explained how she had accompanied a parent to the Autism Support Service and had also taken parents to a number of high schools as they were unfamiliar with how to navigate the various support services, lacked sufficient understanding of the education system and needed advice on the best options for their children. In a high school, another teacher explained the various extra-curricular activities that had been established to support their large population of students of refugee backgrounds, such as weekly meetings of a student social club and homework club.

"All of that is done above and beyond our normal teaching load. So, you know,

between our EAL/D team, it is all done and [a colleague] rocks up every Tuesday at lunchtime to conduct those meetings and [another colleague] and I have been going to homework club.” As she explained: “I am very cognisant of how much extra time and effort EAL/D teachers are putting in for refugee programs with their normal — whatever normal means — classroom teaching.”

Both EAL/D and mainstream teachers across the various schools involved in the project made similar comments but, while firmly committed to supporting students of refugee backgrounds, it was not without its toll. As one refugee support leader commented: “Having the newly arrived refugee students, well, refugee students in general, but especially the very new arrivals, in that initial 12 months is very challenging, very challenging for staff.”

She explained how she had received queries from a number of schools about the wellbeing of teachers who had taken on so much of the responsibility of refugee student support and “how they handle, you know, when students disclose some of the stuff that students disclose and managing students that are so highly traumatised”. One primary school teacher referred to her deep investment in working with students of refugee backgrounds and their families, and of the way in which it had affected her.

It is very challenging emotionally, I think, for us as well because we are, we do build relationships with the students ... I, myself, was having issues because I couldn't cope. The information that they give you it was like ... yeah it is very difficult. It is not just that we are going in as a teacher and you have got no feelings or emotions. We are human too and you are with these children five days out of seven, so they become like your own.

The same teacher also explained the nature of her relationship with these students' families.

Yeah, you get an attachment to them and they do, and the families, you feel a bit of a

relationship with the families. So not only is the child sharing emotions and feelings with you but the parents who then start to come to you as well and like quite often, sometimes you are here in the afternoons with a parent in your room crying and just sharing all this other information with you.

Another teacher explained her own deep bond with her students and the level of care she provided.

Yeah, I know, I have to make them safe, trusting ... I did all that but it's getting to me emotionally ... these are things I cannot tackle. OK, I had no one to speak to. I was scared to take a day off because who will help them? I speak the language, that helps. You know what I mean?

Such comments are not only an indication of the strong commitment of teachers in supporting students of refugee backgrounds and their families but also the ways in which this affects their own health and wellbeing.

While teachers have access to counselling support and the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors offers sessions, this is an area of teachers' work that warrants closer attention. Supporting students of refugee backgrounds and their families may also entail providing additional support to the teachers who take on this role in the interests of their welfare.

## What can the NSW Teachers Federation do to support teachers in the education of students of refugee backgrounds?

As with the executive in each of the Mapping the Educational Experiences of Refugee Students (MEERS) schools, teachers were also asked how they felt the NSW Teachers Federation could assist them in supporting students of refugee backgrounds and their families. While they offered similar suggestions

around providing professional learning and advocating on their behalf around staffing, it was the latter that teachers tended to give a stronger emphasis. As one teacher explained:

I think there are a lot of resources out there. There is a lot of support out there but what we need is at the ground level, on the front line. We need extra teachers. To me, that is the bottom line.

The extra teachers referred to here were those with EAL/D expertise. There was some criticism of the discretionary power that principals now had over staffing and a view in some schools that funds were not being expended on ensuring the necessary allocation of EAL/D teachers. One high school teacher pointed out that “the idea that the funds would be better spent in any other way is ridiculous. So the fact the school can choose to do that is ridiculous.”

Many also wanted to see teachers given an allocation for the additional time involved in working with students of refugee backgrounds that could be spent on mainstream and EAL/D teachers planning the required classroom support for these students, and for the additional community liaison and welfare roles they had assumed. One teacher expressed this in the following way: “I would like release time for the people that actually do the work!” Teachers, therefore, saw Federation as having a key role in lobbying government on their behalf around this form of additional support.

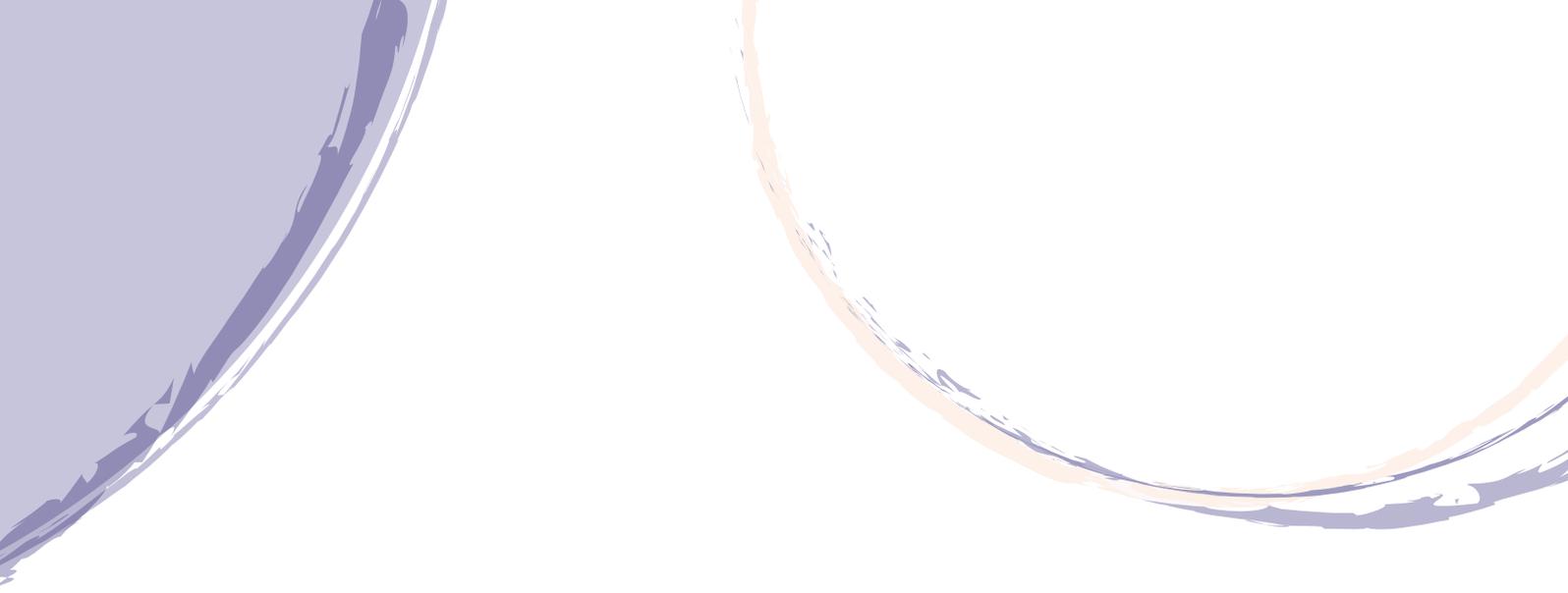
Lastly, many also wanted to see a continuation of the refugee support leader roles. They were highly critical of these being limited-term positions and felt there was an ongoing need for such support especially given the demise of the ESL/Multicultural Education consultancy within the Department of Education. As one teacher remarked: “I think it is good that the Department have created these [refugee support leader] positions now but there was a vacuum for like five years where there was

no consultant and there is still no [English as a Second Language] consultant, for example.”

Teachers clearly valued the work of the refugee support leaders, their ability to lead professional learning, establish and maintain networks of support and offer guidance around the many administrative procedures that were involved in working with students of refugee backgrounds and their families. There was a hope that the NSW Teachers Federation could similarly lobby for refugee support leaders to be continuing positions and for providing additional centralised support around EAL/D.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided the perspectives of teachers from across a range of schools together with those of a number of refugee support leaders on the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds. Their accounts provide further evidence of these students’ complex needs and the challenging work performed by teachers in addressing these that often affects their own health and wellbeing. Teachers detailed a number of issues that confront schools, both those with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds and those with very few. As with the school executive in the previous chapter, they refer to these students’ various EAL/D and welfare needs and point to the highly individualised nature of these and the specialised understanding that is required in addressing them. The classroom observations, however, shed light on the importance of teachers having the required expertise, particularly around English language and literacy, where EAL/D-qualified teachers are a necessity particularly given the relatively short timeframe in which these students need to acquire the academic literacy to meet the demands of subjects across the curriculum.



# CHAPTER 5

## The perspectives of parents of refugee backgrounds on their children's education

It is well recognised that families play a crucial role in the education and wellbeing of students. This is especially the case for students of refugee backgrounds whose families face enormous and very complex challenges when they are settling into a new country (Miller et al., 2018). This chapter focuses on parents of refugee backgrounds and their perspectives on the educational experiences of their children.

The data that informs the chapter is drawn from four focus groups with 20 parents and three interviews with another 25 whose children attended a selection of the schools involved in the project. Interpreters were present to assist with translation, if needed. The parents had arrived from countries including Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Jordan, Congo, Sudan, Rwanda and Lebanon. Their length of time in Australia ranged from a few months to just over eight years with most having entered the country within the last year or so. Parents joining the focus groups and interviewees were asked about their own settlement challenges, their children's educational experiences, the difficulties they had encountered, issues

about parenting and acculturation and the ways in which schools could improve upon their practices in the area of refugee education. In general, the parents expressed satisfaction with their children's education. Many said that their children were happy at school and had improved significantly since they had arrived in Australia. At the same time, however, some expressed concerns over certain school practices that were very different to those in their home countries.

### Parents' perspectives on their children's experiences of schooling in NSW

Parents participating in the focus groups and interviews were overwhelmingly positive about their children's schooling experiences. One mother from Syria, whose children were studying at an IEC, said: "They settle in the school very well ... and they love school, they love their teacher, they are very happy. All of them." Another parent from Iraq spoke about her daughter's experiences at high school.

She is very, very happy here. She has no problem. And there is a lot of help in the school, she feels ... getting the help. If there is a problem, they solve it. She is very happy. There is nothing I can worry about it. If I have a problem, there are people who can translate [for me], there are people who can help me; she is saying everything good about it.

Many parents deeply appreciated the welcoming culture of their children's schools, which was in stark contrast to their children's previous educational experiences in countries of transition. For example, one mother from Syria referred to how her children were subject to physical and racist abuse in Jordan: "The way they treat them was so bad."

In contrast, her husband said that the schools their children attended in Australia "treat people very nice", capturing the inclusive ethos of respect and equity embedded in the school's culture. Another mother also pointed to the inclusive culture at her son's high school. "The schools tell the kids that you are all equal, you are all the same." A parent with children attending Pulver PS made a similar comment.

When my children they came first here to school, the teacher told them, "You are all the same, there is no difference between one and the other". So, it is good.

Parents generally felt they were supported and welcomed by their children's school. In the words of one parent: "I feel myself and the school we are working together. If something is wrong, if my son is doing wrong or [having problems in] his studies, someone will ring me, we work together with the school." Another explained how "when I first came here English was a big problem, also for my kids. But now it is good and also the teachers and the school are supporting us".

Apart from feeling happy at school, parents agreed that their children had performed well academically and had improved remarkably since they had started school in Australia. One parent from Harperville HS

said: "After five months, she was speaking, learning English well, she learned it quickly, and even better than the younger ones. Much better. They feel like they get it." One parent, from Syria, talked about the progress of his child studying at an IEC.

They are at school ... the last five months we saw a lot of difference. When I enrolled them, they couldn't write any letters. Now they are writing, they do description ... he can talk now. He is talking everything. I saw much difference in the last five months, they are improving.

Maria, from Jordan, whose child attended the same IEC, was also pleased with her child's progress. "My son is in the secondary school, we were surprised his level is so good after eight months at school in Australia; he improved a lot."

## Parents' concerns about their children's schooling

### Different experiences of schooling

While the parents generally affirmed the positive educational experiences and learning outcomes of their children, they also raised some issues about their schooling. Some parents admitted that they "don't have any understanding about the education here". Most parents found that the education system in Australia and the practices in their children's schools were very different from their home countries. A parent from Humbervale HS discussed the differences between Australia and her home country of Iran.

I finished high school in my country in Iran but the different thing with the education is in here and my country is ... In here the teacher and the education system doesn't have any force to children and it is up to the kids or the children how they do their homework, how they do their education. But in my country, it was forced ... I have to do that English as a second language ... came back home I have to do [practices of] the meaning and pronunciation and the next time the teacher asks the students to come to the board and

write the words in English and Persian ... And we have like 12 books or 13 books, you have to carry the books home and [to] school.

Sometimes, these differences led to misunderstandings between them and their children's teachers. For example, several parents saw the school practice of "no textbook" as a problem for their children.

In Jordan we used to have every subject they have a book for it to study. Here they don't have books ... I prefer to have textbook so I can see what they are studying and if I can help them. I prefer that they have it.

A mother, from Sudan, with children studying at Palgrave PS talked about her attempt to get her children's "marks" from the teachers. She was told that the school did not grade their students with "marks" and she commented: "I think in every school they should tell their parents what their children's marks are."

One father complained about the high school allowing his son to have "free time". Without an understanding of why his son was given free time, he interpreted it as a wasted learning opportunity.

My son has two times a week free time, and I am not happy with that. Maybe that can provide more support to him like English because this is his second language and he needs more support.

### Concerns over homework

Homework emerged as the biggest issue for parents. Many mentioned that "no homework" or "very little homework" was a concern for them. Their worries partly stemmed from the different school practices in Australia and in their home countries. As one mother explained: "In our country the teachers give kids a lot of homework. They do it at home. But here nothing."

Another agreed: "My son is in primary school, he goes to [the] public school. He has one page — some exercise and that is homework for a week. It is very little. It is for a week." Some parents, however, found

the practice of doing all work during class time instead of also having homework difficult for them to monitor and support their children's studies. "They do everything in the school!" Others echoed this. "Sometimes I see at home they do not have [homework], I say 'Do you have homework?' 'No, Mum, I do not have any homework, I am writing at the school' ... This is a problem for [them]." Another felt that, "they need to have homework at home because we need to know what the children do at the school. If they didn't have any homework, I don't know what my son is doing at the school".

Some parents were satisfied with the quantity of homework given by teachers, or even considered it was too much. One parent commented that: "The homework is excellent. They give us — the child each Monday they are going to be finishing Friday. And [for] holidays, going to be — finish the term, the teachers they give us something like seven, eight pages, for holiday."

Another felt that, "at the beginning, the homework was a problem. We think it is a lot and because we can't help them so we think it is a lot of work". Some parents considered the level of difficulty of their children's homework was appropriate, though not all were in a position to make this judgement. They commented that some schools have a differentiated approach to giving homework to students, which matched an individual student's ability. "I know very well that the homework in here they gave them ... the level is different. They don't give them hard one, like the other children in class. That's what happens."

Yet, many parents still worried that they could not provide any assistance for their children due to their limited English. Some parents suggested that schools should provide homework support to students of refugee backgrounds as they were unable to rely on their parents' help.

The school can give more support for children. Especially the refugees, all those who do

not have an English background to have extra support. For example, the children they go home, they do not understand [the homework] and the parents are not [able to help] ... Then it would be a very, very [big] issue because the student [has no] support at home. I mean it comes to the teacher to give more the support.

While such support was available in some schools, this was not always the case.

### Forming friendships

Many parents admitted that their children considered having friends the most important aspect of school. As one parent said: “They want to be at school so they can meet their friends.” Many referred to how their children “had a lot of friends in Australia at school” and they are “talking and sharing everything, playing”. Parents also said their children tended to have friends from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. As one parent at a primary school commented: “My son, he is with everyone.”

Another parent referred to how her daughter “has got friends, Asian friends, Iraqi friends, she has got a lot different friends”. Many echoed these sentiments, such as one parent who commented “My son at school he has mixed [friends] because in his class [there is] only one Arabic and he doesn’t speak Arabic, so he has all the nationalities to be friends with him.” Even though most students of refugee backgrounds did not seem to have difficulty in making friends at school, some parents mentioned incidents of discrimination or bullying that their children had experienced due to their language, refugee background or religion.

As one explained: “My little son told me, ‘Mum when my friend know I came from like refugee, they go away and do not talk to us’.” Another commented on “the first [fight] was about the religion, the second time it was ... and they just fight and fight a lot with my son. I still don’t know what happened, and the police come”.

Even though parents, like their children, enjoyed the cultural diversity that was evident in most of the project schools, sometimes they were also bullied by students of similar migrant backgrounds.

All our neighbours they were Lebanese, they speak Arabic but you know the kids they don’t speak Arabic, they speak English. So, my son tried to play with them outside and he speaks Arabic with them, and they laugh at him and they don’t let him join. And even my daughter she doesn’t mix with the girls because she worries [that] they will laugh at her because she can’t speak English. This happened when we [newly] arrived.

### Different cultures of schooling

Despite liking the more respectful culture of schools in Australia, some parents expressed concerns about the liberal nature of education in which students were given a lot of freedom and school rules did not seem to be strictly adhered to. One parent of a high school student, for example, raised the issue of her daughter wearing make-up to school.

Like my daughter back in our country, her hair had to be tight, no make-up. Whereas here, she has got to put make-up on. I say to her, “Put your hair up tighter”. “No, no, this is how they wear it at school.” That is the only thing I don’t like about it in the school. They should be a bit stricter, a little bit, you know. No make-up, no mascara, but sometimes she puts mascara on.

Another parent shared a similar view.

I think there is no discipline at high school because sometimes I catch a bus or train and [there were] students in the bus or train at 10am or 11am, they are not at school. And that day, I came from this way and there was a girl smoking outside near the station. So, I worry that my daughter will do the same thing.

### Levels of support and communication

In general, parents thought their children had received sufficient support at school, especially around learning English. A few parents, however, pointed out that their children did not seem to receive an equal

amount of support in other subjects, such as Maths. One, who had been a Maths teacher in Iraq, talked about this problem.

The way they are teaching Maths, especially this year and the year before, the change all the old things that we know for something else. Doing Maths here is very hard for the children as well as for their parents to teach them.

A father, who was also from Iraq, was of a similar view and urged his child's school to provide more support around Maths tuition.

They have many programs to support the children with their learning English but the problem is with the Maths. If the school can like give support for them, to help them, like the children they have the English as a second language [support]. There is a lot of things to help them here with reading and writing but nothing with Maths.

Some parents also raised the issue of poor communication with their children's school. While this was not the case for many parents, it seems levels of parent-school communication did vary significantly and were very much dependent upon the policies and procedures of individual schools.

For example, one parent said "the communication with the school is excellent", and went on to describe a parent-focused initiative held every Monday at his children's primary school.

[Anyone with] problems can come to see [the teachers] from 2pm to 3pm and sometimes the principal will be there and [parents] ask questions and [the teacher] is looking for [solutions for] the problems. It is solved very quickly. All of them are happy with the communication. Even if it is like a very simple thing, [the school] gives [us] a call to tell us that my child, like today, he falls down, or he did something. They give us every single detail that happens in the school, that is what they do. Especially the [translators] are here for speaking Arabic and tell the parents

about every single thing that happens there, which helps them a lot to understand what is [happening].

At other schools, however, parents felt that they did not have sufficient communication with the school and would like to see this improved.

I would like more communication with the school and I want to see what my son is doing and what he is [learning] and what he wants to do, something like that. And what area he wants to improve. Yeah so, I need more communication with the school.

Some parents also commented upon issues with the forms of communication that schools use. One recently arrived refugee from Syria, for example, told us that all the notices or letters sent by his child's school were written in English, which was difficult for him to understand. "It is so hard for us, like, even like when they say excursion in the paper and sometimes I don't know what it says. I don't know what it is about. Yeah it is hard."

At another school, some parents complained that the procedure requiring parents to book for a parent-teacher meeting online or via the phone was a barrier for them due to their limited technology or English language skills. "The problem is they do it online ... if you don't do it online, they give you a phone number and you need to ring and arrange a time to sit down with the teacher ... not lots of parents know how to be online."

Discussions with parents revealed that some schools did not pass enough information on to parents such as on further studies or different educational pathways for their children post-schooling.

It was clear that some parents had never heard of TAFE or had any idea about the range of educational options beyond high school. As one parent remarked: "I don't have much idea about TAFE. I don't know what it is."

Another explained:

My son is now in year 11 ... as a parent, I think we need to know about coming up to year 12. In my country, I know what the education after year 12, but I didn't have any information. I just need to know about if my son finishes year 12 what he can do after that period? Like university or some programs ... I like to know about this.

Many parents of refugee backgrounds tend to have a limited understanding of Australian education or general school practices. Some of the concerns of the parents, such as issues around textbooks, homework, grades, free time or discipline, could have been better communicated to parents in some schools to avoid misunderstanding.

Without adequate parent-school communication, parents could only use the education systems in their home countries as a point of reference, and they would suspect that there were problems if their children's education did not meet these expectations.

## Other issues concerning parenting and acculturation

### Parenting issues

While all the parents were happy that their children had moved to a safe country, such as Australia, some raised concerns that the change of culture had presented challenges around parenting. Some referred to changes in their children as they were now experiencing a greater level of freedom in Australia, especially as they transitioned to adolescence. One parent commented:

Because he is young and a teenager and he arrives here is hard. We want him to be good not to follow the bad way ... I worry about him. And his friends, he got some friends they start to teach him how to smoke.

Another commented on problems she was experiencing with her daughter. "When we were in Jordan, she was very good at school ... but now I don't know what

changed but she is now more concentrate on fashion and model, I don't know what change that."

Changes in family dynamics, especially when parents had to rely on their children as interpreters or to earn a wage to support the family, had led to a weakening of parents' authority. Also, the cultural practice of having a more "democratic" parenting style in Australia had caused tensions between some children and their parents who came from a more "authoritative" parenting tradition. A mother from Syria talked about how her son had become less respectful since they came to Australia and how she met with resistance from him when she tried to punish him.

If I tell him to do something ... I have to repeat it, repeat it. He doesn't listen. Where back in Syria, he was different. If I say something, [he did it] straight away ... If I say anything to my child or if I do anything, they threaten me with the police. They say, 'I can ring the police!' Like, in my country, I can punish him or whatever. Here if I say anything or I have to smack him, I don't know which way to discipline him.

### Maintaining the first language

Maintaining a home culture was also a challenge for many parents. A related issue to this was the gradual loss of a first language. This was particularly the case with children who had been in Australia for a longer period of time and had a better command of English. As one parent said: "I want my children to learn Arabic before they start to lose the language. Yeah, when I ask them in Arabic they don't understand, they answer only in English. I'm worry about that." Another parent also commented on the consequences of this in her relations with her children.

When I arrived here my kids were four years or three years and six years [old] and they grow up [after] three or four years here and I have some problems with our language — Persian ... They can't speak Persian and they can't communicate with me, and when I say

something to them and they can't understand. They just look at me. And also, if they want something from me, I can't understand.

### Parents' aspirations for their children

Parents generally had a “positive” outlook on their children’s future, as one Princeton PS parent remarked, they could be “whatever they want to be”. Many parents echoed the sentiment of one primary school parent who said: “My dream is that they finish their education.”

Others, however, felt it was up to their children to decide their own futures. “I am not wishing for anything. She has the freedom to choose, but for sure she should go to university, but what to study is up to her.” Another felt that, “I like them to finish higher education because here it is hard to find a job if you don’t have education”.

Parents also had high aspirations for their children though many did not want to place too much pressure on them or to force them to pursue a professional career. Most parents seemed to be open-minded about the future careers of their children and were happy to support them regardless of what their choices were. As one explained:

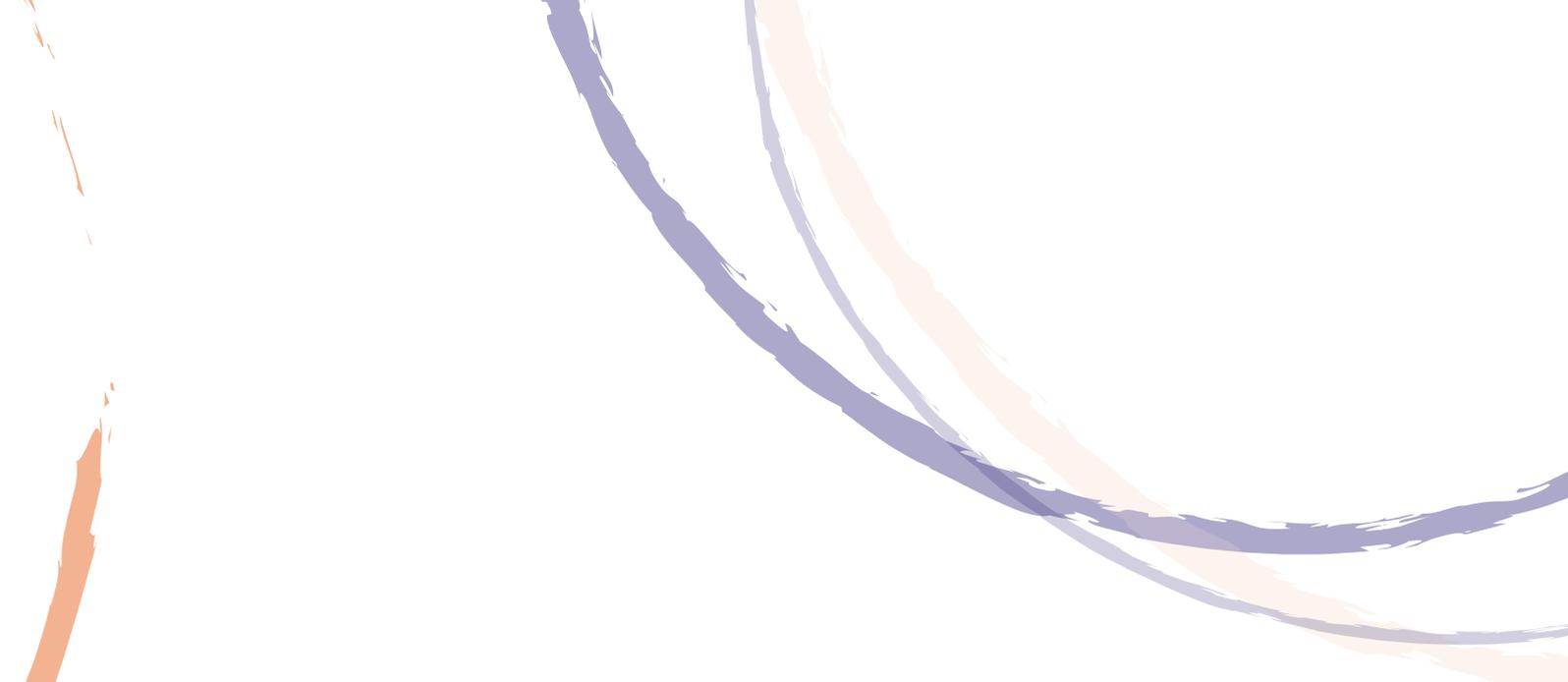
No one forced anyone to do anything, and if he like to do it — he likes to learn to be a mechanic, we will support him to do that. And he wants to go to university, we will support him what he choose, but we want him to be a good boy.

Another said: “My daughter is asking me, ‘What can I do? What do you think I should do?’ [I said], ‘You need to think about it. Do something you like, something you can help the community’.”

## Conclusion

The parents we spoke to were very open about their views on the educational experiences of their children and provided considerable insight into the complex lives they and their children now lived. They were very grateful for the various ways in which schools were supporting them and their children, and that this had assisted their settlement in Australia. Many, however, also raised concerns about their own abilities to help their children and their lack of understanding of Australian schooling.

This obviously shaped some of their views about education in Australia, such as their concerns about what they saw as some of the shortcomings of a more liberal and relaxed approach to education. While some schools were able to communicate effectively with parents and explain these differences, others were far less successful in doing so, suggesting that more could be done in some cases to ensure parents were better informed about processes within schools and the various educational options available to their children.



# CHAPTER 6

## The perspectives of non-refugee students on their peers of refugee backgrounds

Another group we interviewed in schools were students of non-refugee backgrounds. This group is often left out of research into the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds, but we felt it was important that they be included. Apart from the fact that they are part of the school community as much as anyone else, they often have more to do with students of refugee backgrounds than many others, because they share the same spaces.

Indeed, given the interaction between students of refugee backgrounds and the non-refugee students in playgrounds, classrooms and outside the school, they have a crucial if neglected role in shaping the educational and social experiences of students of refugee backgrounds. Consequently, we felt their perception of refugees and the challenges they face was vital in capturing the complexity around the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds. In discussions with these students, we asked a series of questions, partly aimed at getting a sense of what they understood by the term “refugee” — because this will reflect the broader

perception of refugees — but also what they saw as the major issues for refugees in Australia. We also asked these students about the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds at their school.

### A diversity of backgrounds

It is important to note that the non-refugee student groups were varied in their make-up, reflecting the diverse demographics of the schools they attended. Focus groups at schools with high Language Background other than English (LBOTE) populations were necessarily very culturally diverse, while those at schools with low LBOTE populations were not. At Hopetoun HS, for example, the focus group consisted of students of Bangladeshi, Iraqi and Kurdish backgrounds, and many spoke another language at home even if they were born in Australia.

At Pulver PS, one of the students we spoke to had parents who had themselves been Vietnamese refugees. At Hastings HS, on the other hand, the students we spoke to were all born in Australia and mostly of

Anglo-Australian backgrounds, and one with Aboriginal ancestry, one of four with Aboriginal ancestry across the sample. While primary school students tended to be in years 5 and 6, the high school students that were interviewed were from across all years. These differing demographics meant that in schools with low LBOTE numbers, students of refugee backgrounds could be very visible in the playground and in class, whereas in schools with high LBOTE numbers they very often weren't.

## Students' understandings of refugees

As we indicated, one of the first questions we asked students was what they understood by the term "refugee". For some, such as this student from a high LBOTE primary school, a refugee was simply "a person who comes from another country". This identification of refugees with migrants was common, even at schools with a substantial presence of students of refugee backgrounds, like this one, but such a definition was usually augmented by other students during the conversation.

One student with Aboriginal ancestry, and from a primary school with a significant refugee community, demonstrated this after the first response in the group indicated a refugee was simply someone who came from elsewhere.

I reckon a refugee is like someone that is coming to Australia because their home has been like destroyed and there could have been bad things in their country. So, they came to have a new life in Australia.

Typically, students would add information they had picked up. At Princeton PS, a student of Bangladeshi background emphasised that refugees were often "in a dangerous place". At Pulver PS, one student, whose parents were born in India, began with: "A refugee is a person who was not born in Australia." But another, whose parents were born in Ghana, responded:

"They come when their country is in war." The first student also commented that "it takes like a few years for them becoming citizens", and the second student tentatively added, "sometimes they are not accepted" because "they don't speak the language".

High school students often gave more detail, but did not differ in essence from the primary school responses. At Hastings Park HS, where there were very few refugees, one student defined a refugee as "a person that is a different culture but lives in Australia". When another pointed out "there is usually a problem going on like war or corruption" in their country, we asked what they would call someone if they came from another country but weren't a refugee, a student said, "a terrorist, maybe?" At Harperville HS, students focused on the fact that refugees may have come from "a scary place" where "things have got out of hand", but one added that they come to Australia "because we are a fair country".

It was interesting that, when the interviewer asked students at Palgrave PS if there was any difference between a migrant and a refugee, one student refused, saying: "No, because we are all human." Several others responded similarly. This suggests that the humanistic and "anti-racist" message of multicultural education — we are all the same — has been picked up, but at the expense of a critical understanding of the political and economic causes and consequences of refugee experiences.

This humanism was sometimes voiced through a willingness to allow more refugees into Australia, but others voiced ambivalence about the consequences of this. In fact, there was marked anxiety in some responses, as the comment about terrorists above hinted. Such ambivalence is reflected in research into the polarised attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers in Australia generally (Blair and Alam, 2017; Han, 2017), echoing prevailing myths about queue jumpers and so on

(Pederson et al., 2008). But surprisingly there is little research into school students' attitudes to refugees in Australia.

In our focus groups, there was uneven knowledge about where refugees even came from, let alone other aspects. Students would sometimes nominate regions or continents, such as Africa, South Asia etc, while others named specific countries — Iraq and Syria. But they didn't identify refugees by language, faith or ethnic backgrounds, which are often central to the conflicts that have caused them to flee.

This unevenness seemed less to do with whether the school was a primary school or a high school, and more to do with the knowledge of individual students we spoke with. At Hopetoun HS, with high refugee and LBOTE populations, there was a sustained discussion that began with one student despairing that:

... there is no definite answer to these issues  
... There is no end to the refugee crisis and the people having to flee their homes. Like there is no solution to that because no one is helping them.

The group disagreed on whether Australia welcomed refugees, and proceeded to list suburbs in Sydney they thought would be difficult for refugees to settle in — Penrith, Balmain, North Sydney, Hornsby. One added that, even for them, born in Australia of migrant parents, and in a diverse city such as Sydney “people would still give us looks ... We have people wanting to bring back the [White] Australian policy”.

This broadened into a discussion of cultural diversity and, while all students supported multiculturalism, they worried that “in some areas ... it is dominated by one culture”. Nevertheless, as “extremely pro-refugee” they believed Australia should take more refugees; one student argued because “they have talents” and another simply because we should “from a human being perspective, we should be able to help

them”. Others suggested that Australia still needs to “do a little bit of checking ... that they are the actual refugees [or] actual criminals”. However, they also felt that “political and just survival crime is very different” and shouldn't stop people being welcomed.

Students at other schools were often more ambivalent. At Harperville HS, with significant refugee and LBOTE populations, a student argued that “we need to be fair ... and be welcoming”, but added “so long as like they are not a threat to us”. They explained, that if they have done “bad stuff ... in their country” then “we should still give them a chance here” but not if they “bring bad to Australia”.

Students at Palgrave PS were also worried about “bad refugees” with “bombs and guns”. A student at Pendlebury PS was concerned that too many refugees could impact upon Australia's population. “If we get too high we should start saying no ... [especially if it's] not a life-threatening situation.” A peer also raised a concern about some refugees being involved in drugs, which is difficult to check. “It is kind of hard so they transfer their money here and they get lots of money.”

Few students demonstrated any knowledge about issues around trauma. A boy from at Princeton PS whose parents were from Bangladesh talked about refugees who were “mentally scarred from the bombs”. Others focused on the challenges for refugees in Australia. One student at Humbervale HS suggested that these arose because refugees “are often portrayed very negatively in the media and I think that definitely does impact the way people think about them”.

Some “close-minded people ... don't actually try to realise that they are just people”. At Palgrave PS a student also believed that the media and public opinion could be a problem. “Some say that they don't belong, like refugees should go back to where they came from.” She thought this was “not fair

because everyone belongs ... it is not fair for them to feel hurt inside for something that someone else has said". Others agreed that it was especially a problem when people "judge each other's skin colour".

## Refugees at school

The unevenness of these students' knowledge was also evident when we asked them about refugees in their own school. Students suggested general lists of countries where refugee students had come from, without much further detail, again omitting questions of faith, language or ethnicity. Some students simply said they didn't know, or suggested hesitatingly: "I am not sure ... oh ... [they are] from an Asian country."

One student at Harperville HS, where there is a large refugee and LBOTE population, explained that "I am in all the top classes, so we don't really have [any refugees]". At Hastings Park HS, with few refugee and LBOTE students, initial comments suggested those we spoke to had little awareness — "I don't know any", "I don't really know" — but one recalled some students from Sudan. Again they recounted communication issues — "She speaks English but sometimes it can be hard to understand her" — and behavioural issues that caused problems for other students. "He never listens or he just talks."

At Hopetoun HS, the problem was the opposite. With so many students of LBOTE and refugee backgrounds "we don't really know ... it's part of our school where they have people from overseas it could be refugees, migrants come in". Another responded, however, that "we don't know because we don't approach them and they don't approach us and so we wouldn't know if they are refugees".

The exception to this was if these students had become friends with a child of refugee background, or had helped them as a "buddy" when they arrived and knew their

family. But one student at Pendlebury PS explained that, with a student of refugee background that he was helping in class, they didn't talk about his past. "I didn't really bring it up, like make him sad or something."

Others admitted there was little interaction, even at a school with many students of refugee backgrounds. "I hang out at the basketball court ... they have their own section, like the IEC ... they are allowed to come over here but they don't really." The same student was keen to tell us that she had a "mixture" of friends from Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, Vietnam, Lebanon and Cambodia, so it was about a gap between refugee and non-refugee students.

In this discussion, another also suggested that transitioning from the IEC could produce problems for students of refugee backgrounds. "They tend to like know everyone from the IEC because they have made friends over there, and then all of a sudden, they go to the mainstream and it is a lot harder for them to settle in ... they must feel like aliens."

Students occasionally talked about the problem of fitting in, but saw this primarily in terms of language — "Because they don't know a lot of English"; "You can try to interact with them but I find that a bit hard because you don't really understand each other" — or newness. "They might feel a bit shy because it is a new school."

Others acknowledged experiences of racism. One student at Pendlebury PS, for example, told us of one boy who was "rude and sometimes he started swearing", but this was seen as the exception. Another boy at Pulver told us he was "disgusted" when he heard others picking on Muslim students and saying, "this is our country, they should go back to where they came from."

Generally, students were happy for others to maintain their culture and language, but a few could recount disruptions as a consequence, like the "loud" boy who

“forgets English and ... speaks in Arabic, and ... it distracts us”. At the same school, a girl complained of the “refugee students ... who don’t really try to make friends. They just stick to the people who speak their language”.

This troubled other students. “You get unsure when they are looking at you and talking in their language. Maybe in public places they should like try and speak more English ... they can talk as much as they want in their language at home, but yeah in public places you kind of feel intimidated.” At Hastings HS, with few refugee and LBOTE students, one student argued that women should not be allowed to wear a hijab “in a public place like a school [or] the police station”.

At Hopetoun HS, one student in year 11 of Bangladeshi background had a much greater awareness of social issues than others we spoke with, and some sense of the complex position of the students of refugee backgrounds.

Well as far as I know I have met a lot of Burmese and Syrian — not Syrian necessarily, but Jordanians, um, so maybe from the Middle East and I guess South-east Asia. A lot of South Asia ... there is a lot of people from Bengali and they are of refugee background ... Not that many like, you know, European, like, even the Middle East most of them don’t seem to like identify ... they wouldn’t say it straight out like we are from a refugee background. I have only met like two kids who said that. And even then, they are like second generation technically because they were like kids when they came here or like they were born here. Their parents were refugee.

## What do schools do for refugee students?

Students gave general details about how schools provided for students of refugee backgrounds, focusing on language classes, being buddies or support staff in class.

The detail depended on whether their school had programs in place to support students of refugee backgrounds, whether

the students personally had been involved and whether their own class or circle of friends included students of refugee backgrounds. At Hopetoun HS, which had a strong refugee program, the year 11 and 12 students recounted various programs.

Some also noted the presence of students of refugee backgrounds in programs for students generally, such as Peer Support. Others insisted they would “help them”; “We played with him at lunch. We showed him like around the school. And in our work we helped him.” Some students spoke more broadly. One boy from Humbervale HS, with a significant population of students of refugee backgrounds, talked about how “our principal has done a good job in making sure the classes are a safe environment for the students”. His peer, also in year 12, couldn’t remember such a refugee presence when they started in year 7. “The school has adjusted to like cater for their needs”, including more ESL classes “so ... it is a lot bigger part of the school now”. This posed challenges for the school. A third student commented that:

I remember at a meeting one time our year advisor said that we have like in one month we had 10 new students and when we were going through our school photos we were just, like, “Who are these new students?” and he put out a challenge — like you get a canteen voucher or something — if you can name every single student that is new. And we didn’t even know who they were.

Another responded that while the school did try to welcome refugee students, “I think definitely we could be more involved” and that “we need to get them involved more and include them in more things”. She recounted problems in communicating with students and how this contributed to them being left out. Some talked about events such as Refugee Week. “They have a big assembly and then some refugees make a speech.”

For Multicultural or Harmony Day, where refugees might be included in the broader celebration of diversity, they also have

assemblies, and activities in art and making videos or costume events. “You can dress up like in your ... traditional clothing like you wore in your country ... and then we just find out lots of other things.” At Pulver PS, one girl talked about the value of Multicultural Day, “when the whole school is wearing different clothes, like you can see how different we all are but like how different everyone is and ... clothes and like culture”.

A girl from Harperville HS described a typical Multicultural Day:

Part of the day we have this flag ceremony, and everyone in their cultural outfits walk their flag up to assembly ... Last year they played the drums from their background and they were all like doing dancing and stuff. A lot of the school were there to watch that — showed us a bit of their culture.

Such events, however, foreground the dilemma of visibility and invisibility. Students were often unaware of refugee students, and sometimes they could be hyper-aware; sometimes the school engaged in practices to raise that awareness, but students could often disappear amidst the school routine. Several students were conscious refugee students didn’t want to talk about their past or stand out.

Sometimes invisibility could be good, and sometimes not, and sometimes visibility could be good, and sometimes not. Some non-refugee students recognised this dilemma and ruminated on how much of a fuss to make of students of refugee backgrounds. “I think it is hard for them to talk about ... they come from such a broken place ... I want them to like feel safe and not have to remember those things.” A Hopetoun HS student put it differently:

They feel like they are cornered into being categorised as refugees ... it could also like be a traumatic experience as well. So rather than, rather than asking them or rather than being comfortable in saying, “Yes, I was a refugee, yes, I did flee from my home, from persecution”, they would rather not say anything at all.

## Conclusion

What should we expect students to know about the experiences of refugees? There is no simple answer, of course, but we need to ask it. We need to ask it because much of what is offered in the name of multiculturalism is framed as a moral imperative derived from a humanistic framework — to tolerate and respect because they are human like us. This means that discussions often divide refugees into moral categories of good and bad, deserving victims and dangerous threats (criminal, terrorist), but this comes at the expense of actually understanding the causes and consequences of being a refugee. For the most part, the non-refugee students repeat commonsense claims about refugees, positive and negative, often found in the media or at home. But this poses challenges for schools as an educational experience for understanding the complexity of a world that produces refugee movements.

The kinds of events that schools often undertake to promote inclusion, such as the Multicultural Day, might have effects that are problematic and counter the formation of a critical understanding of complexity. Such events have often been criticised as turning “culture” into entertainment (Shankar, 2004). Not only does this entail simplistic characterisations of “traditional” cultures and foster a superficial good feeling that masks the everyday experiences of racism, for students of refugee backgrounds this can be confronting because things like flags and national costumes might invoke the kinds of ethnic conflict that caused their flight in the first place.

The conflating of refugees and migrants, for example, and the limited understanding non-refugee students had of the broader and local issues, would suggest that not all students are cognisant of the circumstances that shape refugees’ lives beyond simple “ethnic” identification (as in terms of

country of origin). It is surprising, perhaps, that little attention is given in schools to systematic study of refugee experiences.

Few of the schools in our study seemed to have introduced curricula on these themes. Several primary school students talked about reading *The Boat* by Nam Le or *The Happiest Refugee* by Anh Do (and struggled to remember details) but little else was mentioned. As the NSW Department of Education (2018b) has stressed, such discussions can be distressing to students, but given that these issues are central to contemporary discussions of migration, and not just school-specific populations it could be expected that they were addressed in curricula in sensitive ways.

Indeed, refugee education should not be solely for students of refugee backgrounds, but contain strategies for helping other students understand the refugee experience.

At Hopetoun HS, for example, one girl complained that schools concentrate so much on Maths and English, they don't address the "political climate" or "integrate political issues":

... but insisted when we go to topics like the refugees, we have to come across the politics and stuff because they interlink. So it is a wishy-washy subject for teachers to try to educate us on issues like refugees.

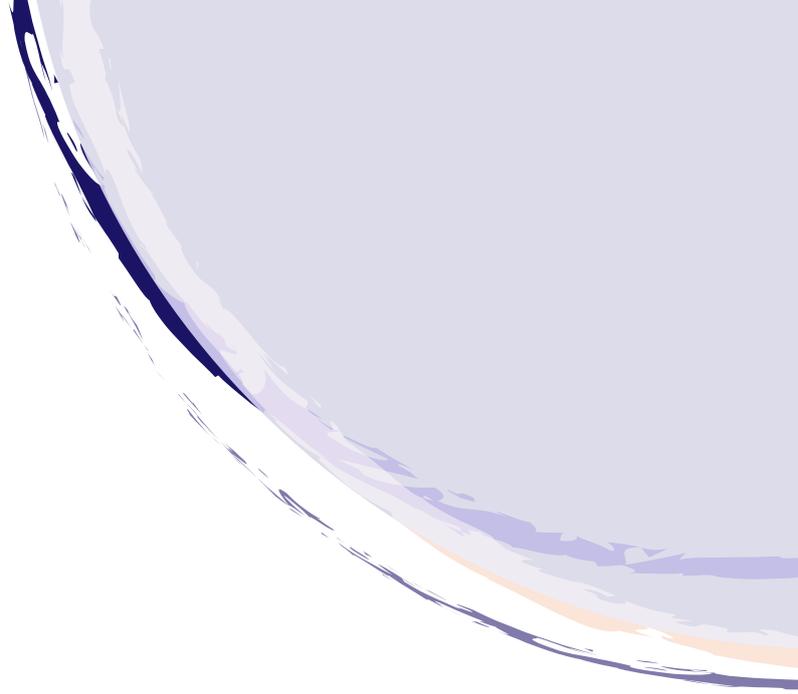
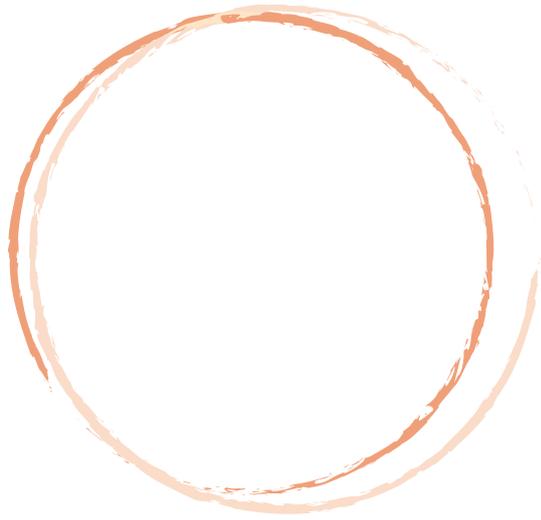
Her group debated these issues at length. "That's why they avoid these types of conversations, they don't want to offend someone, they don't want to get into arguments." "It gets so heated ... there is nothing wrong with that. Someone speaking their mind ... [but] we avoid that situation because we are not learning what the syllabus wants us to learn."

As the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (2016) suggest, it is important to "(p)rovide an age-appropriate political understanding of the causes of war and refugee experience, being sensitive to the experiences of the students in your class".

Indeed, as the Australian Human Rights Commission (2014) argues, to educate students around human rights, at all levels, it is necessary to deliver curricula that addresses global population movements, economic change, nationalism, war, human rights abuse and racism, all of which are crucial to refugee experiences.

A starting point for this would be to suggest that, if a goal of a curriculum for the 21st century is to develop in students the knowledge and skills to understand a complex, globalised world, then a key aspect of that would be to examine political and economic processes at national, regional and international levels. The experiences of refugees are part of these processes, alongside broader processes of migration and cultural diversity, and a consequence of when these processes create conflict.

Of course, these issues must always be handled in a sensitive and age-appropriate manner, but if we expect students to study, for example, historical experiences of invasion, war and conflict (as we might do in studying black-white relations in Australia), and develop a critical understanding of, as well as empathy for, others' social circumstances, then schools must address how we can best deal with these issues in a contemporary classroom. Given that short-term interventions seem to have little impact (Turner and Brown, 2008), then we need to develop effective educational programs that address these issues in a sustained way, and effective professional learning programs for teachers that support them in doing this.



# CHAPTER 7

## The perspectives of students of refugee backgrounds on their own education

We now turn to listen to the students of refugee backgrounds we spoke with. We have left the final chapter to these students, of all the participants in this study, to ensure they have the “last word” on their educational experience. As well as talking to these students in groups, we interviewed several individually or in pairs, and we also observed them in classes, the playground and at school and after-school events. We discussed issues around their experiences of settling into school and Australia, the educational and social challenges they and their families face, and broader issues of Australian society, education and their futures. We end with profiles of two of these students who capture typical but contrasting experiences of students of refugee backgrounds in NSW schools.

### A diversity of backgrounds

The families of the students of refugee backgrounds involved in this project came from a variety of national backgrounds,

reflecting current patterns of intake: the majority from Syria and Iraq, but also many from Afghanistan, Congo, Iran, Myanmar, Sudan, Thailand, Indonesia and Jordan. Most did not come directly to Australia, but fled to another country first. Some had come via two or three countries, with varying lengths of stay. Not all these students were born in their family’s country of origin: many were born in the country their families fled to, and several were born in Australia.

One young girl said she arrived here in her “mummy’s tummy”. Several had lived in various camps, and one had been in “four or five detention centres, I can’t remember” including Christmas Island and Curtin. They had been in Australia between three months and four years. Several had lost one or both parents and now lived with relatives in Australia. We didn’t ask details about their journeys, but we did ask about experiences of schooling before they came to Australia. Of those who were of age when they left their homeland, many had some experience

of school, but across the group most had disrupted or in-transit or no schooling before they arrived.

## Settling in Australia

The first thing that most students wanted to tell us when we asked about their impressions of Australia was that they were “happy”. One 15-year-old Iraqi student of refugee background, for example, said: “It felt like I was in paradise.” Another, younger boy put it simply: “There is no fighting.” Australia was “very quiet” compared with their homeland. They documented many things that were different to their homeland, or where they had been before arriving. “Nature ... I open the window and, wow, everything is like ... big city, everything was new.” “Everything like, from cars to weather, to trees and people, like their culture, their language, their education, their thinking, it is all different.”

This was exciting, but also frightening. “I have lots of problems ... but with time I adapt.” Students at one regional school said their town was a “bit boring” and there wasn’t much to do, but one stressed she was “not complaining”, and another that “my family thought we were going to Sydney [but] I was so grateful because we come from a place where it is not safe at all”. For many, “the hardest thing [was] family not here”.

Of course, many students’ families had difficulties finding work and housing. “We spent about five months to find a house ... It is really hard to find a house in Australia, but the government helped us.” This student said she was “comfortable now, after 18 months, because people here are good” but also because she was in a place where there were many people “from my country”. As Wali et al. (2018) document, refugee and diaspora networks are a major factor behind successful settling.

Several students commented that “there are lots of like rules you have to learn ... in

school, everywhere ... we [Iraqis] don’t have lots of rules”. A young Syrian boy listed those he liked. “The first rule is no fighting, the second rule is no one ask you for like, ‘Give me your phone’. I like this rule ... Everyone just respect each other.” Fighting at school was a concern for some. Three wrote “fighting” as a thing they didn’t like in the drawing booklet they completed in their workshop with researchers, while others listed “rules” as something they liked.

We often forget that the mundane bases of everyday life are often not only the most obvious problems for new arrivals but also difficult because they challenge tacit understandings of how interactions with others operate (Noble and Tabar, 2014). This has to occur alongside the formal learning of a new language and school curricula. Many students listed specific aspects of having to learn new ways of doing things: “the road”, “seatbelts”, “I was like surprised because of the streets, because in Iraq we don’t have a street for walking [footpath]”. Because of this, it took a while to settle: “three months, four months and then I feel comfortable”. Other students said it took longer: “one year to discover the country and to get used to it”; “around two years”.

While many recounted experiences of racism — “go back to your country” was a common comment — some maintained there was “no racism” here, at least compared with their homeland. “That is why we left our country.” Others said that “Australian people they don’t like to talk with us”. Some balked at being identified as a refugee, and the “labels” people used. One girl talked about how people she didn’t know had filmed her on their phone, without her permission. “That make me really upset.” Another said she “struggled” with “bullying” or people “that just make fun of me”. Many didn’t use media because it was “sometimes good, sometimes bad”. At one IEC, students “are not watching the news because ... it upset us”, especially news of their homeland.

Most students were also surprised that Australia was so culturally diverse: “I really like it because in my country we didn’t have this, in Australia like it is multicultural ... I really like to ... discover different cultures.” Another was surprised that “everybody was like me!”. Everyone is “different” in Australia, “when you mix with them it look like you see the world in one place”.

Few had knowledge of the services available to their families. Some mentioned places like Centrelink, but many typically referred to “the government” as the provider. Of course, it would primarily be their parents and carers who accessed these things, but given that the students often stood in as interpreters, it is surprising that older students did not have greater understanding. This reflects the low “literacy” in settlement services that researchers have documented (Wali et al., 2018).

Despite this, many felt that Australia was becoming home. “I don’t want to feel like I am a refugee, I want to feel like this is my country now. I am Australian now.” Unlike this reaction to the negative identification of being a refugee (Uptin et al., 2016), others were pragmatic about being seen as a refugee. “It doesn’t bother me because like I just came as a refugee ... so it is normal for me.” Another at the school told of her mother who used to say when they first fled to Lebanon from Syria, that they were “like tourists, not refugees”. But while Australia felt like it was becoming home, Australia was “good, but it could be better”. Her peer added: “I have never really lived in my own country.”

## The challenges for students of refugee backgrounds

Most students of refugee background talked with affection about their schooling experience in Australia, even if they were struggling. Several primary students listed “learning”, “class”, “reading” or “writing”

as a “like” in the drawing booklets they completed as part of the research. Most felt they were learning quickly, but still had problems with language. A few had some English before they arrived, but for those who spent time in transit, they had already struggled with another language, a process which was then disrupted.

Now, many spoke three or more languages. A few were illiterate in their first language, which complicated their settling and learning. During the focus groups and interviews some responses from students were in their first language with interpreters providing translation during discussion. A lot relied on media such as Facebook – “that’s where I learn my English”. One girl, now at high school, said that when she started at primary school she “wasn’t connecting” because everything was different. She remembers a teacher “screaming at me and I didn’t even know what I was going wrong”.

Students at IECs were most positive about the support they had received. As one 18-year-old said: “It is really great ... I learned a lot of things ... you can learn a lot of things if you work hard or if you focus on the future.” Even from “the first day”, the IEC got them talking and writing. “We like write narratives, like we learn, we talk about some things.” One boy said the teachers had a “smart way to teach us”. A girl in his group emphasised repetition in the learning of English. “Look at the word, cover it, practice and check and it is right, write it again ... and we keep practising.”

They also had a buddy system for new students, and would try to get students who lived in the same area “so they can catch the bus together”. But even at an IEC little things could be obstacles. One gave the example that they learnt numbers but since they didn’t know what “plus” was they couldn’t understand maths.

The experiences at IECs were also more focused on settling students. “They do activities ... just make you feel comfortable.

And also, they give lessons of Australia”, an invaluable feature of the wider school experience (Naidoo, 2009). This included trips to the ocean or the zoo. “They are doing everything they can.” As another indicated, it was a vast improvement on their experience in the past. “I like everything in this school ... because in Iraq it was very different and horrible”, students had to “sit on the floor because there was not enough desks, and the teacher was very strict and angry”.

Teachers in Australia were “kind”. “Everything is perfect for me, they are nice, they teach you, they support you.” Another complained that in Pakistan “they hit you: here they are not allowed to hit you”. One student said, “they let you speak what you think. There [Jordan] we don’t have voice ... Here is more like they give you confidence ... It is more modern way.” One thing they did at this particular IEC was to get students to write something about themselves in their first language, then translate it and use it repeatedly for students to read, present, copy and identify words. “It very good and it helps us develop.” As one girl explained: “It is my story and I know the story, but sometimes ... I don’t know how to say it. I keep practising.” One of her peers said: “with the story ... because we repeat and we learn new words in that story. If I write 20 like that one I would love that.”

School could also be overwhelming. One boy stopped coming for a few days but realised “I didn’t learn anything, so it is better to go to school and I start to work harder to learn”. The first day, even at an IEC, could be terrifying. “We didn’t understand anything and we were like scared.” Personal networks were crucial: one student said it was easier to settle because “I have cousins that help us how to learn English and when I have homework ... when I’m struggling ... they help me”.

High schools with connections to an IEC also got positive responses. This could be because there were already many IEC

students, bridging courses and programs (meetings, visits, homework clubs) and teachers who were used to students of refugee backgrounds. For many, teachers were crucial to settling into the new school: achieving her goals, as one said, “comes from the teacher,” because they encourage her. “The teachers ... they make it easier for you ... They help you, they support you,” another said. Their school had a weekly meeting where “they bring students to help you after school ... [discuss] problems and do excursions”. Another had a weekly homework club where “people come in. They help the kids with things”.

Despite their uptake of English, many students relied heavily on their first language, especially at home because many parents or carers did not speak English well. But, this could be seen as a problem. One boy admitted that he spoke Arabic in the playground, but said that he liked to have friends who didn’t speak Arabic “so I can talk to them in English. I don’t like in the class to talk with my Arabic friends because I want to improve my English”. Another estimated he spoke “70 per cent Arabic” at high school and several said they used their phones to translate words in class. Others, however, such as a boy at an IEC, used his phone to practice English via messages; he also used a dictionary.

Others were worried about reliance on their first language. One who had transitioned into high school was surprised that “half of the class they speak Arabic and I can see that they are here for a long time”. She was hesitant about the fact that shopkeepers continued to speak in their first language, which “won’t help”. “Finding friends” and having a common language were linked. As one child said: “I felt scared because I didn’t know how to speak English and I don’t know how to make friends.” Now they have “a bunch of friends ... that are like other countries”.

Students at the IECs were also more likely to think the school communicated well with

their parents or carers: as well as sending letters home, “they do have meetings and tell the parents about everything in the school and the problems that we have”, in their first language as well as in English. Their parents tried to help with homework, but this depended on their proficiency at English.

Most students were hesitant to describe experiences of racism, insisting, as one did, that “everybody is friendly”. But most recounted incidents of varying severity. One boy talked about how he “didn’t know the rules during sport”.

I had a problem with a small guy and he threaten me like he said bad things ... so I got angry and shouted and my brother came to help me. And then we went to [the teacher] who [has] responsibility to fix the problem. And she said like you have to stay calm ... respect them even though they don’t respect you.

Others said it could be “little things”, or that “sometimes they don’t want to talk to you ... so you just stay by yourself”.

A group at a high LBOTE high school voiced the contradiction between standing out and fitting in. One girl commented that other students “should know like we are the same ... but we have difficult in our country that is why we move in ... not because we are wanting their money or something”. But when we asked if they thought it would be good to stand up at assembly and tell others their story, she said: “No! ... because we try to blend in.” Rejecting the “spotlighting” that schools often expect of students of refugee background (Oikonomidou 2010, p.79), one young girl said: “I get stage fright.”

## Transitioning from IECs to high schools

Many students expressed affection for their IEC. “I loved it there ... the teachers, and I had friends that talked the same language.”

So, transition could be stressful for many. “I was a little bit scared.” One girl wasn’t ready to go to high school “because no one tell me ... how it was ... it was scary for me to come here”. “It is a big change it is not like the IEC”, another explained, “because I have to actually to listen to focus because the teachers are speaking so fast ... but it is really good because I am trying to improve my English. In the IEC, they sit with us to explain everything but in high school we must have initiative of doing work.”

Many talked of the difficulties of moving to high school part-way through the year. Two girls said it was “bad” at first, they “hate it”, “they talk super-fast and I take a while to catch all their words”. Another talked about how she had “missed one term”; with exams coming she felt she had “missed out lots of things”. She thought it would be good if students could stay in the IEC until the end of the year, and start high school in first term.

A few admitted that they had returned to the IEC after their initial attempt at high school because; as one said “it wasn’t like my level”. One 18-year-old at an IEC who had missed some years of schooling would probably not transition to high school with his friends; he “worries about his age” a lot. Classes are also bigger in high school, and they can get lost. “The more small it is the more we have knowledge and understanding.” Many found the behaviour of students in high school less “respectful” towards teachers. Some commented that in Australia, students “are not respecting the teachers”; “they are always talking and ... calling out ... can’t learn anything”.

They also found the idea of choosing subjects intimidating, and their parents were unable to help them as they lacked the required proficiency in English and “they do not understand how the schools work”.

Another issue for IEC students was that they were less likely to make “Australian friends” because they didn’t attend IECs. If they were lucky, they made the transition

to the mainstream with their IEC peers and ended up with some in their classes, which helped them to settle. Because of this, however, they often didn't make "Australian friends" after they had transitioned. One said that students as a whole weren't as "welcoming" as the teachers. Another said the biggest problem was with students of Arabic background who were born in Australia — they called her an "import".

## Students of refugee backgrounds' views on education

Many students of refugee background talked about how they would like more work at both primary and high school. One IEC boy urged teachers to "give us homework every day, let us read a lot, and spelling tests". One girl said: "I like to do activities ... homework, and I like to write ... anything if the teacher gives it to me I do it." A couple commented that they didn't do enough assignments at the IEC. One said he would tell others to "study hard and to learn to work hard and he will learn if he work hard here".

One boy said he liked "to work by himself ... I like working in groups but it is a bit noisy". IEC students liked being in groups because they could consult with each other. "If I don't know something the other will say it." But this was not in competition with teacher direction: "The teacher has to explain and later we sit in a group and we do the exercise." Another young boy said: "I prefer teacher because when she explain everybody can listen." Similarly, for one it is best "when the teacher is talking". Others liked working in groups, but it wasn't to help with learning. "I feel comfortable when we work as a group. Nobody bother you because you have your group."

One girl said it was important for all teachers to be "patient" like they are at an IEC. Another said "they should find a way how teachers should handle children". Some ex-IEC students thought that it would be

good if IECs and primary schools used them as a resource, where they could talk to new students of refugee backgrounds and give them advice based on their experiences.

## Students of refugee backgrounds' views on their future

It was interesting how many of the students of refugee background invoked the future, whether asked or not. A boy said Australia was paradise because "I wanted to build my future, to learn new languages, to be like an architect". Another claimed he had "started a new life in the school and a new future here". An IEC boy expressed some frustration because being identified as a refugee hindered this. "I don't want to feel like I am a refugee, I want to feel like I am Australian now."

Most students had some sense of what they would like to do after school, and it ranged broadly: dentist, actor, "something that includes Maths", police, nurse, design, biology, soccer player, electrician, and so on. Others simply said "university". A few had no idea. Many of these students, however, had heavy burdens. One boy, for example, managed a shop on the weekends, TAFE once a week and Saturday School to help him "get some ATAR marks". "I don't have time to study [at] the weekend." His parents expected him to take on many responsibilities. "I am the eldest ... if they want something they send me."

For some, coming to Australia changed their options. "In my country I wanted to be an artist but when I came to Australia I found that I have the opportunity to study and be a lawyer, so my dream is to be a lawyer." In contrast, a boy said his parents wanted him to be a teacher or a doctor, "but I am different ... I feel like plumbing is easier", and started vocational training while at school so he could get a job quickly. "In the future if I got tired of plumbing, then I can change to something else ... because I

am ready to study again.” Like him, a girl, even though she was in the senior years, found life too volatile. “Every month I change my dream.”

Students in regional towns often expressed a desire to go to the city for further education or employment (Piper, 2017). One group actually burst out laughing at this question. As one said, Sydney was the place they wanted to go because “there is just more jobs ... more options”. Some would not go back to their homeland: too much “damage”. Others would because they had family there — but only if it was safe. One student in year 10 captured the ambivalence of many with a view that Australia offered:

Lots of opportunities. Some of them are really depressed because they love their country, so they come here just to live safely and build a future for their children. They even come for a future for themselves, they try hard ... to open up a new page of their life. They are really happy in Australia, but, they are like homesick.

## Students of refugee backgrounds' sense of ambivalence and in/visibility

The responses given by these students reflected not simply the specific needs of students of refugee backgrounds, but a broad range of views typical of any student population. In this regard they were settling into school well. Yet other issues — safety, certainty, racism and bullying — are woven throughout discussions. There was a deep desire to get as much as they could from schooling, but tinged by a degree of ambivalence stemming from not really feeling comfortable with the demands of a new language and education system. But experiences could be quite contrasting, depending on many factors, not least of which was the school environment (Miller et al., 2018). To illustrate this, we profile two students from two very different schools.

### Jansher's story

Jansher is a year 12 student at Humbervale HS, a regional school that has been targeted for refugee settlement. While Jansher said he was “from Afghanistan”, he was born in Pakistan, where his family fled and lived for 14 years. His father died during this period, so Jansher, as the oldest son of many siblings, worked in a factory 14 hours a day, six days a week. Each day he would attend school from 8am to noon, then work, then return to school for three hours, then go back to work. Studying in Pakistan “was expensive and ... the culture was hard” (in fact, his older sister didn't attend school).

His family came to Australia in 2014. No one could speak English, so he spent “some time” in an IEC. He now speaks six languages. Australia, “so different”, was “exciting ... because Australia is a safe country”, but also challenging. “You don't know anyone ... I can't even talk to anyone.” For the first “couple of months, I didn't want to go out because I didn't have the language”. “When I came first to school ... I get bullied by some of the students ... telling me to go back to my country.” It happens less now, but occasionally he has problems with “silly people” who are “racist ... say some stupid stuff”. Otherwise, “I am friends with everyone”.

Apart from language and racism, he found other challenges: “transport was the biggest problem because we had to buy shopping from Coles or Woolies and we had to push trolleys” home. He works 20 hours a week in a shop. While working in Pakistan “was bloody hard work”, “the work here is not hard. I am not sure why Aussie kids they are saying like Australia is hard lifestyle, ... [they] don't know what is a hard job.”

He found transition to the mainstream difficult. “It was pretty hard for me because you know in ESL I had like friends from the same country and another country as well and we understood each other properly because we had broken English.” Whereas in the mainstream classes he couldn't speak “properly” and some others “make fun” of this. He would have stayed in the EAL/D class “if it was up to me”, but he is “very grateful” that they moved him because “I learned more outside of the ESL class” out of necessity.

However, he wished mainstream teachers were more like EAL/D teachers. “Some of the teachers they don't know how to teach the students of refugee background properly ... they think we understand everything. But we pretend like we understand but we don't ask questions.” He wanted the teachers

to offer more “explanations”, especially since he “didn’t want to ask in front of everyone”. Another difficulty was the poor behaviour of some; “they were interrupting the students’ work and making noise ... they didn’t want to do anything ... I didn’t learn a lot”.

After school, he has a “plan” to do a TAFE “mechanic course”. He thinks he can do this in his regional town but feels he will eventually have to go to a city. As the oldest son, his family would have to go too. They are still very dependent on him. He often has to interpret for his mother who often rings while he is in class.

He thinks he has “changed a lot” since arriving. “In Pakistan ... you have to defend yourself ... so I used to be kind of like a very angry boy.” Although he would like to visit family he left behind, Australia “is my home”. He is settled. He feels confident that he can pass on his knowledge to others. When new students of refugee background arrived at the school, on his own initiative he “explained everything to them like how to talk to people ... tell them like to make some Aussie friends ... you have to be nice to everyone”. He agreed it would be good if the school used people like him to help new students of refugee background, “because I know how it feels to be new”.

### Ashar’s story

Ashar is a year 9 student at Hastings HS, which has a low refugee and LBOTE population. Throughout the interview, Ashar was wary, and her responses brief. Her family was from South Sudan, but when she was 11 they fled to Kenya where they stayed for a year before coming to Australia three years ago. Ashar and her brother came without their parents, and live with a relative. She had little idea of what to expect when they came to Australia, but commented that “it is better”. She attended school “sometimes” while in Africa. In Kenya, the lessons were “in Swahili mostly and English”, so she had “a little English” when she arrived, and now speaks three languages. She speaks mostly Dinka at home, “but sometimes English”. She goes to Saturday school to learn how to write Dinka.

When she arrived in Sydney, Ashar spent 18 months in an IEC, which was “good ... doing reading and sometimes writing”, and then went to one high school before coming to Hastings. She had been to three schools in three years. She had a buddy at the previous school, but not at Hastings. The previous school also had “a lot of background students, a lot of Africans”, as well as her older brother and cousins, which made things easier.

Ashar admitted that “it was a bit hard” to settle into Hastings, because “I was the only black person”. Now there are three. At first she received “nasty” comments, but claims “I am over it now; if they say it I don’t care”. She mentioned a teacher who said “mean things”, but wouldn’t elaborate. When we asked what advice she would give to students of refugee background, her reticence disappeared, and we heard a more forthright, but bitter young

woman. “I would tell them that you can’t be happy, because of the racism like people are judging about your skin.” This was “only [at] school”, not outside it, but she had made some friends from Syria, Thailand and Samoa, and some Australian friends, but added, “some like Aboriginals that I am not friendly with”. In a school where they put more emphasis on Aboriginal issues than multiculturalism, this is significant.

She was hesitant when we asked if she was happy with school, or if the school could have done more to help her settle. She says “I don’t know” twice. While she didn’t have a buddy, she did have a support teacher initially, and felt her English was good. Nevertheless, “I used to like English but I hate it now”, because there is “too much writing”.

Ashar admits to being a “problem”. She had been moved to Hastings “because of my behaviour” at her previous school, but felt she was “a bit better”. She commented that a difference between school here and in Africa was that, in Australia, “if someone hit you, you can’t hit them back”. She got in trouble for retaliating and thought it was “not fair”. Also, she thought students here were “really bad. They swear at teachers. In Africa because a lot of kids respect their elders, [but here] they don’t actually respect, even their parents.”

Ashar’s family is very involved in the South Sudanese community, and their church for Dinka speakers is a centre of community life. She likes the “African dancing” they do, and became animated when she talked about this, showing videos, describing moves and clothing. This was a happier experience for her than school, where she both stood out, and was subject to racism, and ignored,

because no one showed interest in her culture. She'd like to have a dancing group at school, and teach people, "but not dance in front of the school".

She had no investment in school. The thing that motivated her was sport. She was a good runner and liked Oztag. She was more energetic in the PE class we observed than elsewhere. Yet, apart from the student who ran alongside her, she did not interact with others. Ashar had little sense of what she would do in the future. She didn't want to be a teacher, though, because it involved too much "responsibility" and because "if you are a teacher you have to be yelling all the time".

Staff commented on the "trouble" Ashar had in forming relationships and behaving. She had lots of "run-ins" with students who made "racist comments" or had "rejected" her. She started

copying bad behaviour, like swearing, which got her into trouble. They knew vaguely about her history. One said she had been "traumatised" but no one had consulted the file on her, or knew whether there was a copy at school. As one teacher said, she had not received any "special information". The learning and support teacher thought that her mother tongue was "Sudanese ... I don't know what dialect". Another said: "as a teacher I would have liked to know a little bit more before they just turned up."

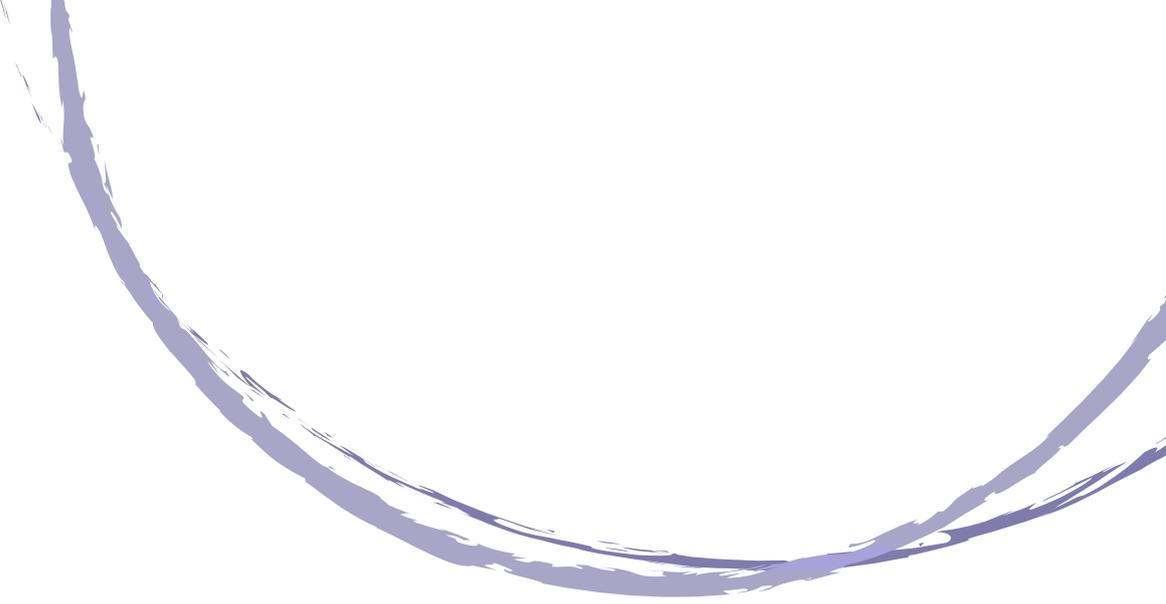
She had received support in English and Maths when she arrived, but since Ashar had been in Australia for more than three years, and because there were no substantial number of students of refugee background at the school, she no longer received support. While the school had activities for Aboriginal students, as the principal noted, "nothing that we do ... naturally fits in for our refugee kids".

## Conclusion

The two students profiled here give insightful and moving accounts of their lives in Australia, reflecting contrasting experiences of schooling for students of refugee backgrounds. Ashar suffers from the paradox of visibility and invisibility. She is noticeable, because of her skin colour and her behaviour, but she also falls between the cracks educationally. One teacher described her as "angry", another said there "is a lot of frustration"; it is not hard to see why. Jansher, on the other hand, is happy. He has received substantial, ongoing support in a school which is well-funded, primed to address his needs and to help him settle.

Most students we spoke to fell within the spectrum Ashar and Jansher represent, reminding us again that there is not a single "refugee experience" but a range

of experiences that reflect the complex contexts from which these students have come and the contexts in which they now find themselves. Most spoke warmly of their schools and teachers, but they also voiced many hardships, within school and outside it, that shaped their ability to live the kind of life they were hoping for. They recounted their struggles with language and "fitting in" to an alien system and an alien country, their encounters with racism and cultural diversity, and the efforts of their teachers and schools to allow them to achieve their educational goals. But these efforts were clearly uneven, reflecting the distribution of resources and expertise found across the schooling system, and the diverse social contexts of Australian life. Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, most of these students retained a positive outlook on their educational experiences and their futures in Australia that is now their home.



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

**‘It is such a complex thing working with refugees.’**

— High school EAL/D teacher



The recurrent theme across the various chapters in this report has been that of complexity. It is not only that students of refugee backgrounds and their families have complex needs and that meeting these needs is also complex but that public schools in NSW also have existing populations that are inherently complex including students with language backgrounds other than English, Aboriginal students, those with physical and intellectual disabilities and many who experience socio-economic disadvantage.

It is important that teachers and schools are well supported in addressing these needs. There is no denying that considerable support is already available through the NSW Department of Education and various other government, non-government and community organisations but this support

is uneven across schools. Still more could be done, and there are areas where improvements could be made.

Within this report, various actors have provided their perspectives on what these measures might entail from organisations that work with schools, school executive, teachers, parents, non-refugee students and, most importantly, the students of refugee backgrounds themselves. Below is a set of recommendations informed by these perspectives on the educational experiences of students of refugee backgrounds that pertain to: school processes and procedures; staffing and workload; teacher professional learning; curriculum materials for students; centralised support for teachers; and working with external agencies. It is hoped by acting upon these that the complexity that is refugee education can

be better navigated; ensuring improved educational outcomes for these students and the enhanced participation of these students and their families within school communities.

## Recommendations

### School processes and procedures

#### Recommendation 1

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##### **Improve procedures around the enrolment of students of refugee backgrounds in mainstream high schools and primary schools**

While most schools with large populations of students of refugee backgrounds have effective enrolment processes in place — whereby all teachers are notified of students' refugee backgrounds and the implications this may have for how their needs are addressed in mainstream classes — in schools with low numbers, this information is not always captured. It was also evident that this information was not always relayed to teachers and other relevant staff such as year advisors to ensure they can then address these students' needs within their teaching programs and be alert to any possible welfare issues. In high schools, IEC exit reports need to be forwarded to, and considered by, all the teachers of transitioning students of refugee backgrounds.

#### Recommendation 2

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##### **Semesterise the transition of students from IECs to mainstream high schools**

Presently, students of refugee backgrounds can transfer to mainstream high schools on a quarterly basis. This is not only disruptive for the students transferring but causes enormous disruption for teachers and students in mainstream classes, as teaching programs need to be adjusted to cater for new arrivals. This disruption could be minimised if transitions only occurred bi-

annually, allowing teachers to plan more effectively and affording transitioning students greater time to settle within the mainstream.

#### Recommendation 3

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##### **Develop the use of youth of refugee backgrounds, with positive settlement experiences, to act as a resource for newly arrived students**

Many students of refugee backgrounds have insights into the refugee experience and could be used to assist newly arrived students' own settlement within school communities. They would also function as role models for new arrivals. While some schools have such buddy and mentoring programs in place, these practices need to be more widespread across schools.

#### Recommendation 4

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##### **Improve communication between schools and parents and carers of students of refugee backgrounds**

Many schools communicate very effectively with parents and carers of students of refugee backgrounds, making full use of interpreters and translation services. This, however, was more the case in schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds. Those with very few need to have a better understanding of the availability of these services and the importance of ensuring information is communicated to parents in the required language. Improved communication extends to a whole range of school activities so parents are well-informed about their children's education, especially in high schools with regard to post-school study, training and work options.

## Staffing and Workload

### Recommendation 5

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#### **Appoint EAL/D-qualified teachers to all EAL/D positions across IECs, high schools and primary schools**

Some teachers of EAL/D classes observed during this research did not have EAL/D qualifications and their ability to address the complex English language and literacy needs of students of refugee backgrounds was severely constrained as a result. Students need teachers with the required expertise otherwise difficulties with second language acquisition simply become compounded over time with long-term implications for these students pursuing further education and/or entering the workforce.

### Recommendation 6

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#### **Ensure compliance around period allowances for EAL/D and mainstream teachers to undertake lesson planning and review and enhance accountability procedures in relation to this**

EAL/D and mainstream teachers need time to ensure they can team-teach effectively when working with students of refugee backgrounds. A period allowance to assist this process is therefore required if teachers have three or more students of refugee backgrounds in their class.

### Recommendation 7

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#### **Ensure compliance around period allowances for staff performing community liaison work when assisting students of refugee backgrounds and their families**

Parents are partners with schools in students' education. This role becomes especially important for parents of students of refugee backgrounds who may be unfamiliar with the education system in NSW and need additional guidance in how to support their child. While many

schools already communicate effectively with parents of students of refugee backgrounds, there are others that could improve these processes. Ensuring staff receive a period allowance to undertake this work would assist with improving these practices in schools, enhancing parent/school partnerships with benefits for the settlement of students and the school community as a whole.

### Recommendation 8

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#### **Improve counselling support for teachers whose health and wellbeing have been affected by vicarious trauma**

Many teachers' own health and wellbeing has been affected by vicarious trauma as a result of the disclosure of traumatic experiences by parents and students. While some teachers have received counselling support for this or have attended NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) workshops around accidental counselling and vicarious trauma, this support needs to be more widely available.

### Recommendation 9

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#### **Increase the number of counsellors in schools with significant numbers of students of refugee backgrounds**

Many schools indicated that the counselling support they received was inadequate. Given the large number of students of refugee backgrounds in some schools, the allocation of counselling support needs to be increased to adequately cater for these students' complex psychological needs.

## Professional learning

### Recommendation 10

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#### **Improve the understanding of all teachers, across the curriculum, of EAL/D pedagogy**

Given that now almost one in two of the Australian population is a migrant or a child of a migrant, many of whom do not have English as a first language, it is imperative for all teachers to have a much greater understanding of the teaching of EAL/D. It should be a requirement within initial teacher education and for those already within the profession to undertake the required professional learning around EAL/D in the mainstream. This will ensure students of refugee backgrounds entering the mainstream will be better supported as will other students who have EAL/D needs.

### Recommendation 11

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#### **Develop professional learning materials around cultural understanding and the refugee experience that would include separate modules for schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds and those with limited numbers**

Many teachers, even those in schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, lack complex understanding of the set of issues that shape the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds. In this research, teachers often felt they couldn't talk about refugees' experiences for fear of further traumatising students, or they talked about students in culturally reductive ways. Professional learning materials are needed that address the socio-political causes of refugee movements, the international contexts in which these occur, human rights approaches, the traumas of fleeing and in-transit life, the challenges of settling and the complexity of the linguistic, religious and ethnic dimensions of refugee experiences.

### Recommendation 12

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#### **Improve mechanisms to address racism in schools**

Despite the NSW Department of Education's anti-racism policy and the appointment of Anti-Racism Contact Officers (ARCO) in each school, it seems much more is needed to address racism in NSW public schools. Various participants in this study, and students of refugee backgrounds in particular, refer to incidents of racism in their schools that are often not reported and of which many staff are unaware. Further training of ARCOs may be required especially with regard to how racism may affect students of refugee backgrounds in schools.

### Recommendation 13

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#### **Improve the training of school learning support officers — ethnic**

While school learning support officers — ethnic perform an important role in schools, assisting teachers in classrooms with students of refugee backgrounds, better training of these staff is required especially around their role within EAL/D contexts to ensure their work supports students' English language and literacy acquisition.

### Recommendation 14

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#### **Deploy the expertise and resources accumulated in IECs across a range of schools**

IECs accrue enormous expertise in dealing with students of refugee backgrounds — both educationally and socially — and have developed significant curriculum and other resources that would aid mainstream schools — particularly those with little experience in dealing with students of refugee backgrounds. Networks to harness and disseminate this expertise are needed in addition to those already established by refugee support leaders.

## Curriculum materials

### Recommendation 15

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#### **Develop curriculum materials for schools around cultural understanding and the refugee experience**

Many students, even those in schools with large numbers of students of refugee backgrounds, lack complex understanding of the set of issues that shape the experiences of students of refugee backgrounds. In addition to professional learning for teachers, sensitive and age-appropriate materials need to be developed to address the socio-political causes of refugee movements, the international contexts in which these occur, human rights approaches, the experiences of fleeing and in-transit life, the challenges of settling and the complexity of the linguistic, religious and ethnic dimensions of refugee communities.

#### Centralised support for teachers

### Recommendation 16

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#### **Ensure the refugee support leader positions are ongoing**

Given the increasing number of refugees entering NSW public schools, there is a need for the current refugee support leader positions to be ongoing to ensure teachers are well supported in addressing the complex welfare and educational needs of students of refugee backgrounds.

### Recommendation 17

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#### **Ensure there is centralised EAL/D and Multicultural Education support for NSW public schools**

As discussed above, almost one in two of the Australian population is a migrant or a child of a migrant, many of whom do not have English as a first language. It is imperative that teachers receive appropriate support in how to address these students' needs, many of whom are also students of refugee backgrounds. Teachers

currently have limited support at a central departmental level around addressing these students' EAL/D needs and also to provide support around multicultural education, including racism, in NSW schools. This was a particular need in schools with low LBOTE and refugee student numbers that lack staff with this expertise and access to multicultural education experts to work in schools.

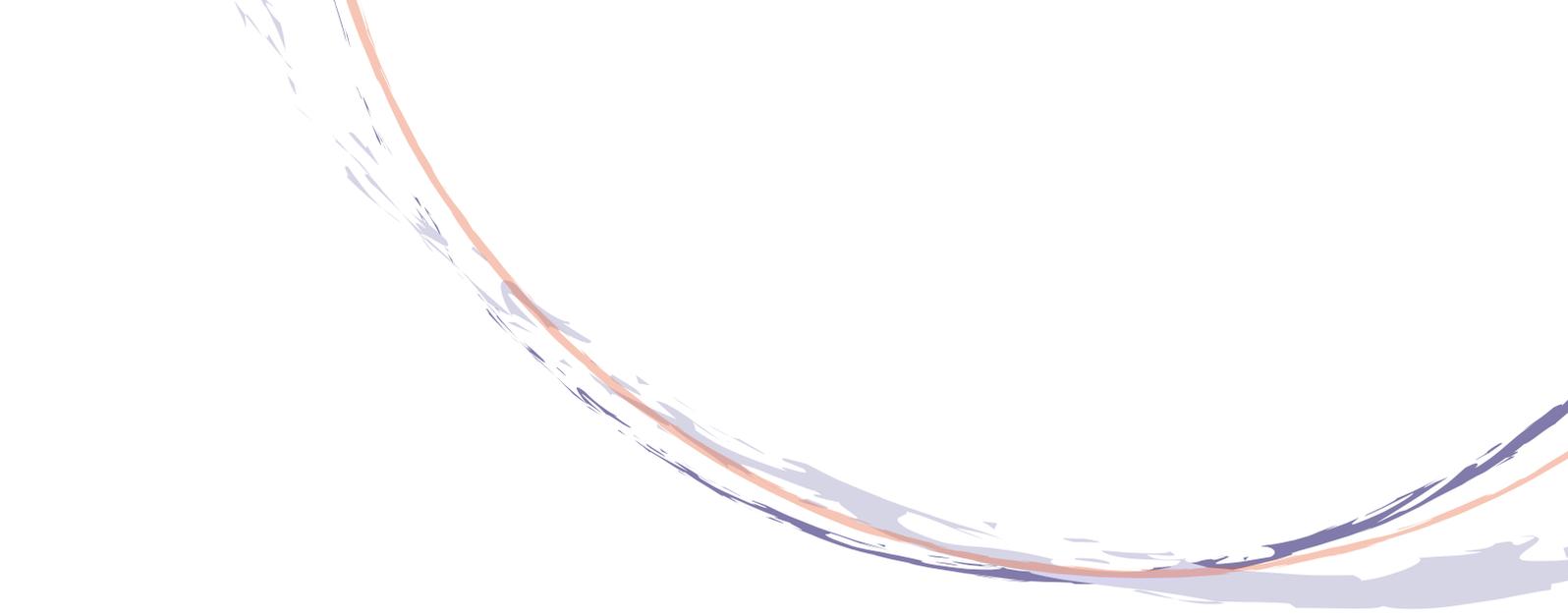
#### External agencies

### Recommendation 18

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#### **Improve the coordination of government and non-government agencies that work with schools around supporting students of refugee backgrounds and their families**

While great improvements have been made in developing a whole-of-government approach to resettlement issues, further work needs to be undertaken to embed this in the everyday relations between government departments, settlement services and refugees and their families, with a clearer focus on the centrality of schooling in these relations and how this impacts on the lives of students of refugee backgrounds.



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