

**SUPPORTING REFUGEE STUDENTS THROUGH THE
REFUGEE ACTION SUPPORT (RAS) PROGRAM: WHAT
WORKS IN SCHOOLS**

Tania Ferfolja & Loshini Naidoo
School of Education
The University of Western Sydney

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report examines how the Refugee Action Support program (RAS), a collaboration between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, the University of Western Sydney and the NSW Department of Education and Training has been effectively implemented in two high schools in Greater Western Sydney. The program, a School-University-Community partnership, is located within the secondary teacher-education degree at the University of Western Sydney. It requires pre-service teachers to operate outside the formal classroom environment, providing specialized individual and small group literacy and numeracy tuition and support to secondary students from humanitarian refugee backgrounds.

Many of these students arrive in Australia from countries with a history of conflict where school attendance is either interrupted or not possible. These students may be affected by psychological trauma, and have experienced material, personal and/or cultural loss. On arrival they are required to adapt quickly to new social, cultural, economic, and education systems. Most of these students arrive with a limited knowledge of English. Although able to enrol in Intensive English Centres (IECs) for English language instruction prior to entering the mainstream education system, this provision is often of limited assistance as proficiency in academic English takes several years, with more time required for those from interrupted educational backgrounds (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006).

Hence, refugee students enter mainstream secondary classrooms with a limited knowledge of English. As such, the immediate need for these students is English language and literacy acquisition. As these students have few resources to access intensive language and literacy education in addition to that provided through IECs, it is imperative for schools to find alternative means to support the needs of these students. The RAS program is an example of how these language, literacy and numeracy needs can be supported.

The research on which this report is based used a case study approach to examine how the RAS program operates effectively at two sites. The schools, each selected for the on-going success of their program approach, have evolved different implementation models. Using semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders, the research broadly examined the structure of each program, the perceived effect of the program on teaching and learning, as well as the perceived reasons for its success at each site.

General Findings from Site 1

- Students were identified by the RAS site-based coordinator. Attendance at the tutoring centre was voluntary with the majority of regular attendees being students in years 10-12.
- The program was organised according to a generic RAS structure. Tutors arrived at the end of lunch, worked with RAS students in their afternoon classes, and then provided support to students at the after-school tutoring centre.

- The program focused on student needs and was overwhelmingly student directed. Most tutoring supported the completion of homework, assessment and assignment tasks. The RAS tutors also provided assistance with cultural knowledge often assumed in mainstream classrooms.
- RAS tutors offered additional support to students that teachers could not necessarily provide during class, which reduced teacher anxiety.
- RAS provided students with greater understandings about academic processes and learning skills that they could generalize to other learning situations.
- Afternoon tea provided sustenance to attendees but also supported the development of rapport among the students, tutors and the coordinator. Interacting on a first-name basis combined with the relative youth of the tutors also contributed to the relaxed atmosphere.
- Both general-purpose classrooms and computer rooms were available at the tutoring centre which provided access to appropriate resources for the students and their tutors.
- Multiple tutors at the one site provided students with immediate access to, and support from, a broad knowledge base.
- Student enthusiasm was demonstrated by students' regular attendance and not wanting to leave the tutoring centre of an afternoon; this often resulted in a later finishing time than planned.
- Debriefing sessions were held at the conclusion of tutoring which enabled issues to be discussed and resolved. The debriefing also highlighted particular needs for the following session and monitored student progress.
- There were numerous reasons why the program was perceived to be successful at this site. These included but were not limited to: the effectiveness of the coordinator, both organizationally and interpersonally; the flexibility of the program and its focus on students' needs; the focus on small group and individual instruction; the friendly, social and welcoming environment; the fostering of academic learning; the development of a strong learning culture across year groups; the free tutoring; and the work ethic, academic goals and academic successes of the students.

General Findings from Site 2

- There was considerable flexibility in the program's structure so that while the structure was generic in terms of RAS, the school altered its regular timetabling so that RAS students had less interrupted learning times.
- Participants indicated that the welcoming climate of the after-school tuition centre facilitated attendance. The centre was perceived as a place where emotions could be expressed through peer and adult interaction and this was influential in the school adjustment process.

- There was a high level of inter-faculty collaboration with open and reflective dialogue between teachers, management staff, tutors and students. RAS was integral in increasing the confidence and status of refugee students within the mainstream school environment.
- The teaching and learning approach adopted involved the whole school, that is, community, teaching staff, management staff and students.
- Family and community involvement was also important. Support from parents and the community for the RAS program was high and this enhanced refugee student motivation to achieve academically.
- There was a focus on refugee student learning where the tuition program aligned with school-based goals such as that of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.
- The success of the program was further evidenced by the fact that mainstream students from mainly Anglo backgrounds have accessed the program on a “drop in” basis. Therefore, it was not only the refugee students that received assistance, rather disadvantaged students from a wide variety of social, cultural and economic backgrounds were benefiting from RAS.
- Both teachers and university tutors found their experience and involvement in the program rewarding particularly as they worked closely together to define expectations for tutors and students. The norms and values of the program philosophy were shared by the school community and this contributed to the professional community of the school.

Introduction

The Refugee Action Support (RAS) program is a collaboration between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), the University of Western Sydney UWS) and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET). RAS provides homework and study assistance to refugee students who attend high schools identified to participate in the program in the western and south western regions of Sydney.

RAS uses pre-service teachers in the Master of Teaching (secondary) degree at the University of Western Sydney as tutors. These tutors provide academic support to refugee students in twelve week cycles. The program, initially conceived by Eric Brace from the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, was first implemented in 2007 in four high schools. It has since grown to serve nine high schools in the region with sister programs being implemented by other universities in other parts of NSW. During this time, the program in each of the schools has evolved in different ways in order to compliment the site-based structures and requirements of the host school while simultaneously best meeting the needs of the RAS students.

Previous research undertaken on the RAS initiative focused on pre-service teachers and to a lesser degree students participating in the program. This work found that pre-service teachers learned much about students' diversity and gained considerable insights into the nuances of pedagogy and practice. It found through tutor and teacher observation that the effect on refugee students who regularly attended the RAS tutoring centres was noteworthy. These perceived effects included improvements in many academic processes as well as less measurable gains in personal attributes such as confidence and self-directed learning (Brace, 2010; Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010). Students acquired significant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) that could be activated not only in other learning situations at school, but in the broader social context¹.

This report outlines current research findings into the RAS program in 2 high schools. Using a case study approach, the work documents what contributes to the success of the program in these schools. Although the program at both sites follows the generic RAS structure outlined later in this account, each school has adopted a different approach and philosophy towards its implementation, illustrating how the RAS model can be tailored to effectively address site-based needs. The data reported herein from both of these sites offers important information and insights for other schools and organizations, interested in establishing the RAS program or a similar School-University-Community partnership aimed at working to benefit disadvantaged students.

¹ For more information on this work see: Brace, 2010; Ferfolja, (2007; 2009; 2010 in press); Ferfolja, & Vickers, 2010; Ferfolja, McCarthy, Naidoo, Vickers, & Hawker, 2009; Naidoo, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2009e, 2010).

The organization of this report

Before beginning the discussion on this study, it is important to outline how this report is organised. The structure includes four introductory sections that provide useful contextual information. These are:

Refugee students in schools: a broad overview. This outlines some of the general experiences and educational issues faced by young refugees who settle in Australia.

School-University-Community Partnerships explains broadly what these collaborations entail.

The Refugee Action Support Program (RAS) outlines the generic structure of the program that is applied across the nine schools involved with the initiative.

Methodology broadly illustrates how the research was undertaken.

The remainder of the report comprises two sections which outline the key findings from each case-study site, followed by concluding remarks.

Refugee Students in Schools: A Broad Overview

Approximately 43 million people worldwide were displaced from their homes in 2009. Of this number, approximately 15.2 million were refugees (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2010). Australia is a recipient of refugees, and has one of the “highest per capita rates of refugee reception in the world” (Pittaway & Muli, 2007, p. 21). Currently, Australia accepts about 13 000 refugees annually. In 2008-9, the origins of these refugees included Africa (33%), the Middle East and South-West Asia (33%), and Asia and the Pacific (33%) (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2009).

Young refugees who arrive in Australia are legally required to attend school. Depending on their origin and experiences, many of these students arrive with limited English. Thus, an immediate need for these students is English language acquisition. Typically, young people entering public high schools can access up to 510 hours of instruction in Intensive English Centres (IECs) before going into the mainstream education system. However, the acquisition of academic English language expertise takes many years (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006), and thus it is questionable as to how prepared these young people can be for the subject-specific literacy demands encountered in mainstream secondary education. This dilemma is compounded for students who arrive in Australia with little education as is frequently the case for humanitarian refugee students coming from countries with long-standing conflict and disrupted school attendance (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2007; Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Hones, 2007). Older refugee students are at a particular educational disadvantage as they are placed in classes which reflect their chronological age, yet their literacy and numeracy abilities may be well below the academic requirements of their year.

Thus, these students enter high school at a serious educational disadvantage. This is compounded by other factors such as having experienced psychological trauma (Foundation

House, 2005; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008); having to adapt to the expectations and culture of a formal education system, knowledge of which is taken-for-granted by those already teaching and learning in the system; having to deal with material, personal and cultural loss; and having to adapt to an entirely new social, economic and cultural system. Racism also prevails (Brown et al., 2006; Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). These combined issues may affect the resettlement and integration of these young people into education (Goodman, 2004).

The long-standing lack of educational infrastructure in their home countries may mean that parents and/or caregivers also have minimal or no schooling. They may possess poor or no English and/or may be illiterate in their mother-tongue. Thus, although supportive of their children, many parents are unable to provide academic assistance at home and cannot afford private tutoring as many refugee families experience socio-economic hardship in their host countries (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008). Hence, educational institutions must find alternative ways to support these students to reduce the multiple disadvantages they encounter. School-University-Community partnerships may provide such alternatives.

School-University-Community Partnerships

Schools that serve populations who are socially and culturally diverse may benefit from additional support through active community participation such as that presented by School-University-Community partnerships. Most public schools where large numbers of refugees are enrolled find they do not have sufficient resources to deliver what is needed to meet the complex needs of those students. Successful School-University-Community partnership activities, such as RAS, can link partnership activities to school improvement goals enabling the development of reciprocal interactions through which they provide useful services to the community as well as receiving useful services from the community (Epstein 1995). When parents, students, teachers, university academics and other community members view one another as partners in education, a caring relationship forms around students and this can help students to become more successful at school because they become the centre of this partnership.

The resources provided by School-University-Community partnerships can enhance the outcomes of multilingual, culturally or linguistically diverse or disadvantaged children by creating a context within the school where such students are provided with opportunities to increase their chances of success at school. They can also provide a context in which to support parents' efforts to develop their children's skills, and to help maintain lines of communication across generations. These partnerships can also increase parents' opportunities for social participation as they become involved in activities through people like Community Liaison Officers who provide bilingual and bicultural support for parents and school personnel. School-University-Community partnerships also give school personnel the opportunity to expand their awareness and appreciation of other languages and cultures represented by the community and by their unique experiences and backgrounds. Effective partnerships are characterised by: a solid relationships between the school, the university and the community; a specific focus on localised needs and contexts; continuity of provision of funding and human resources; professional development for teachers and pre-service teachers; and cross-sectoral networks between schools, university and community-based agencies.

While the partnerships model brings much needed support into the classroom, collaborations with teacher-education institutions also create opportunities for multiple transformations. For schools with limited resources to assist disadvantaged students, pre-service teachers studying at university are able to provide valuable mentoring or tutoring support to students who need additional help. At the same time, their participation in such activities gives them new insights into the lives and pedagogical challenges facing students whose needs are not well met through mainstream provision. Insights gained through these interactions often have transformative effects on beginning teachers' understandings of young people from diverse backgrounds. This experience can have a long term effect on the kinds of teachers they become.

The School-University-Community partnership activities in the RAS program provide one example in which curriculum support has been established for refugee students. It illustrates how such programs can work with families and communities, create and foster a learning culture, and help refugee students meet their academic potential, among others.

The Refugee Action Support (RAS) Program

RAS is located within the secondary teacher-education degree at the University of Western Sydney. It is the third of three professional experience placements that pre-service teachers complete while undertaking their teaching qualification. RAS, in contrast to the other two professional placements, requires pre-service teachers to operate outside of the formal classroom. Pre-service teachers work in a one-to-one or small group tutoring situation. Here they enhance their pedagogical and inter-personal skills while providing valuable support to secondary students from humanitarian refugee backgrounds. The approach of RAS draws on one of the key tenets of academic service learning known as reciprocal learning (Abourezk & Patterson, 2003; Anderson & Erikson, 2003; Donahue, Bower & Rosenberg, 2003; Musil, 2003). In this approach the tutors and student-recipients gain useful knowledge and/or support as a result of working together, as the “young refugee students are supported in their development of academic skills and socio-cultural understandings while simultaneously, pre-service teachers gain an appreciation of the complex dynamics related to teaching, students and diversity” (Ferfolja, 2009, p. 395).

To prepare pre-service teachers to become RAS literacy and numeracy tutors, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation provides all tutors with approximately 20 hours of literacy and numeracy training, which aims to meet the needs of refugee learners². These tutors have also completed literacy and social justice subjects in their teaching qualification. They are allocated a tutoring centre to attend (sometimes called a homework centre or study centre) which is located in one of nine high schools identified by the NSW Department of Education and Training as having a high population of humanitarian refugee students. Most of these refugee students are enrolled in years 7-11 and have made the transition from an Intensive English Centre to mainstream schooling within the previous 2 years.

² This training has been developed and implemented by Mr Eric Brace from the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation.

The RAS tutoring centres are open to refugee students one afternoon per week over a 12 week cycle. Generally, RAS tutors arrive at the school at lunch time and assist students to whom they have been designated. These same student(s) as well as other refugee students and the tutor then attend the tutoring centre after school. All are provided with refreshments in preparation for the afternoon's teaching and learning activities. These activities last for approximately two hours.

Typically, a combination of individualised and small group support is provided at the tutoring centre, depending on the numbers of students attending in any one week, and the centre's allocation of tutors. Student attendance numbers fluctuate, depending on their needs, but a 'core' group present regularly. A teacher employed at the school is paid to coordinate the school-based centre, to supervise the tutoring sessions, and to provide feedback and support to the RAS tutors. The tutors are not paid; instead participation in RAS contributes to course credit. In the early years of RAS, an ethnic community liaison officer (CLO) was employed to establish and maintain communication with students' parent/s or caregivers. The CLOs promoted confidence and understanding between the school, families, students, and RAS tutors, thus assisting with the program's implementation; however, due to a reduction in funding, the CLO position is generally no longer viable.

Over the last three years, RAS has evolved. Many of the schools participating in RAS have adapted the program to meet site-based requirements. Later, this document details how two schools have tailored their program to meet student needs. It also examines how these programs are perceived by the key stakeholders in each respective school. Although quite different in structure, both site-based programs provide excellent models for how RAS can be implemented. It is necessary, however, to first briefly outline the method of the research conducted at these sites.

Methodology

Drawing on previous investigations of RAS and through discussion with key stakeholders, two high schools involved in the RAS program (which will remain anonymous for reasons of confidentiality) were identified as having developed successful programs that address site-based needs for refugee students. These schools participated in a case-study analysis of the program and its implementation. The case-study approach provides rich data about each target site, through the multiple layers of information acquired. This enabled the researchers to 'create a picture' of the RAS program at each school.

Based on qualitative research methods, the investigators used semi-structured individual and group interviews to gather data and document experiences from a range of participants involved both directly and indirectly with the program. This semi-structured approach enabled the researchers to re-order the questions according to the direction of the interview, to allow for latitude in the questions, and to gain detailed information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These interviews provided a range of perspectives at each site.

The research focused on the structure, effect, and value of the program, as well as the participants' perceptions regarding the reasons for its success. It also sought responses from participants in terms of how RAS supports teaching and learning in their school generally. Questions were asked about how the program could be changed or improved. At each site, the

Principal and/or Deputy Principal, the program's organizing teacher (otherwise known as the school-based RAS coordinator), four classroom teachers of RAS students and two RAS tutors (UWS pre-service teachers) participated in research interviews. Refugee students who regularly attended the RAS tutoring centres were involved in a group interview, one of which was conducted at each site. For reasons of confidentiality, no names of either the participants or the schools have been used in this report.

The data were transcribed and categorized into themes. Using an interpretivist approach, the researchers have not set out to find singular or 'correct' responses to questions, but rather, have endeavoured to demonstrate the type and range of responses gathered from the participants. The voices of the participants provide a well-rounded insight into the mechanics and effects of the RAS program in each of the target schools.

The Case Study Sites

Site 1: Research conducted by Tania Ferfolja

Background to Site 1

Site 1 is situated in the western suburbs of Sydney. The population in the area is comprised of predominantly Anglo-Australians (approximately 72%). However, the school population is more multicultural, comprised of about 35% of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The school runs a variety of extra-curricular activities for students, ranging from the creative and performing arts through to sports training; however RAS is the only program directly aimed at supporting refugee students. It should be noted that the school does have a very active and highly visible multicultural committee that both educates about, and celebrates, cultural diversity. Many of the refugee students who participate in RAS at this school are reportedly involved with this committee, which places cultural and ethnic difference in a prominent position in the school's profile.

Site 1 has been involved in the RAS program since 2008. Like other schools in the program, the school's participation began after it was targeted by the DET for its relatively high population of humanitarian refugee students. The school-based RAS coordinator participated in an information session conducted by the DET, ALNF and UWS. This session provided information about the aims, objectives, expectations, procedures and protocols of RAS. A number of weeks later, UWS pre-service teachers who in addition to their studies for their teaching degree had received 20 hours of training from the ALNF on literacy and numeracy, arrived at the school. This enabled the tutoring centre to begin its work. The running of the centre, including identifying and passing on information about the centre to potential student participants, negotiating with tutors, following up on student issues and so forth, has largely been the responsibility of the RAS coordinator. In her words, the coordinator perceived her role in the tutoring centre to involve:

Over-seeing the whole thing... although it depends ... the numbers change ... If we get twenty kids, we're flat chat so then I might actually sit down and help ... which is a little bit more stressful because I have to also keep an eye on what's going on.

Refugee students in the school were identified by the ESL teacher who was also the coordinator at this site. She informed the students about the opportunity to attend. Initially, the coordinator met with the identified humanitarian refugee students as a group, providing them with “a permission note with a detailed explanation of [RAS] so that they could take it to their parents to tell them what’s happening”. Attendance was voluntary, and not all students accepted the invitation to participate. However, in general it was popular amongst the refugee students. As the coordinator described it:

It’s becoming bigger than Ben Hur ... It does vary but I’ve got 34 names ... Now they don’t come every week ... we’ve got about 15 that are there all the time. Obviously if they’re sick, have exams, or if there’s work placement, we might be a bit down a bit on numbers.

At this school, it appeared that the vast majority of regular attendees were students in years 10-12. One reason for this, articulated by the coordinator, suggested that younger students were “not as needy in some ways”. That is, younger students have fewer pressures in terms of examinations and assessments, and therefore have fewer immediate concerns and thus, tended to participate less frequently. As the centre operated on the basis of students’ needs, which will become clear is one of its perceived strengths, there was less of an imperative for younger students to attend.

How RAS supported teaching and learning in the school

RAS was a useful program that supported teaching and learning in the school in numerous ways. The RAS coordinator illustrated how the program’s tutors provided assistance to students to complete assessment tasks with which they were struggling. This increased the likelihood that the students would submit the task and meet course requirements, reducing the chances of these students receiving a N-Award for not completing assessments. In the long run, this may potentially contribute to students remaining in the education system longer. As the coordinator commented:

It helps refugee students who are struggling with the demands of the course ... I think if they’ve got an assessment, often the head teacher is happy if they get the work in. Often they’ll say to me they’re struggling but if they just hand something in I can give them a couple of marks. Whereas before, those kids probably wouldn’t have handed anything in and would have got zero because they couldn’t do it ... They just throw their hands up and say it’s too hard, I just don’t know how to do it. (RAS coordinator)

The RAS students recognized the benefit of the additional tuition in helping to complete assignments as tutors were able to explain or deconstruct task requirements.

Also when you have assignments they just write the question for you, and it’s easier, like when you just have one big question they make like small questions so you can do it well and do it by yourself. (RAS student)

The RAS tutors offered the additional support to students that teachers could not necessarily provide during class. Teachers are restrained by large classes, limited time, and a mandate to

complete curriculum content. It is difficult to be able to meet the educational needs of seriously disadvantaged or struggling students in such contexts. Thus, knowing that help was available through the RAS tutoring centres, reduced the anxiety some teachers experienced. The teachers also recognized that for some students, asking for extra help in class could be culturally embarrassing for students. As the teachers explained:

It gives teachers a break because they don't have to worry about differentiating the curriculum ... We've got a lot on our plate ... so with them coming to class and being prepared and kind of knowing what you're talking about is a relief. So you don't have to hold back the class, and they don't feel held back either. It's a two way street really.
(Classroom teacher)

It gives you more idea ... more time with the teacher [the tutor] to explain us more ... our teacher [in class] she can't stay for one person, but here she [the tutor] can stay for more than one person. (RAS student)

[RAS can] give them one-on-one support and hopefully the teacher could rely on that ... and kids can ask quietly without embarrassment ... Some of the cultural knowledge [they need] is just phenomenal for someone who's been in the country for just a few years.
(Classroom teacher)

In terms of learning, RAS was seen to provide students with greater understandings about academic processes and learning skills that they could generalize to other learning situations.

Really at the end of the day we've been helping them, going through and making sure they understand, and going through things with them and joking around with them saying, "I'm not going to write the answer for you. So what part of that paragraph do you think is important?" ... And next time, you think if they go and do another question that's similar and going back and having a look at those points, that you actually do something related to literacy. (RAS tutor)

At times, mainstream teachers make broad assumptions about the knowledge and understandings of their students which may be appropriate if students have been educated in an Australian system, but problematic when they have not. As stated earlier in this report, many refugee students have interrupted schooling experiences, and thus knowledge gaps are to be expected. The students also lack cultural knowledge that is often assumed in the curriculum. The RAS tutors can thus offer support in relation to this learning. Some of these assumptions were illustrated by the following comment:

I think a lot of teachers say, right, do a report on this and they come in here and say well what's a report, how do you write a report, how do you reference it? Teachers sometimes expect them to do that when they [the students] have missed a lot of that. So the tutors are good. (RAS coordinator)

The Principal pointed out that the effect of RAS on teaching and learning transcended what was directly occurring through the RAS program. She highlighted how RAS contributed to teaching and learning in the long-term because pre-service teachers who had not yet entered

the profession, were being developed by the program. This provides long-term benefits to teaching, learning and the profession generally.

Structure and Implementation

RAS at this site reflected the generic RAS structure outlined earlier in this report. On Thursday afternoons, tutors arrived at the school at the end of lunch and worked with RAS students in a regular classroom situation. This enabled the tutors to observe the students working in the mainstream teaching/learning context and also provided them with some insight into the topics being addressed in some of their classes. Students who were not given parental permission to stay after school for tutoring were, where possible, recipients of this additional support during the in-school sessions. In some instances, the in-school sessions enabled a greater focus on struggling students, as pointed out by the tutors below.

In my prac [practicum] I have a refugee kid and she is actually struggling a lot with her literacy so she actually joined the group and I work with her now every week because I know what she's doing in class and I set her practice activities that are related to what we're doing in our class work. So I'm always with her and go back and forth between her and other students and I check her work. (RAS tutor)

I've also been helping a year 12 student doing a nursing course through [names a university] and so I've been helping her of late and helping her out when she has free periods. (RAS tutor)

As the above quotes illustrate, one of the advantages of the RAS program's structure was that pre-service teachers who worked as RAS tutors simultaneously undertook one of their required regular teaching practicums which involved mainstream classroom instruction. This meant that they were able to familiarize themselves with the RAS students as well as some of the content being taught. It also meant that they could become acquainted with the RAS students in a different context. Furthermore, it allowed the RAS students to access the tutors at other times during the week. As one tutor commented:

I generally see three students because of the connection with the students in my commerce class so that was three boys ... I met them here [in the RAS tutoring centre], so this started off first but they had seen me in their classroom ... They knew that they had a commerce assignment and miss [the tutor] should be able to help, [as] she was in class. (RAS tutor)

Afternoon tea was supplied by the school for the students and tutors. This not only provided sustenance but importantly supported the development of rapport between students, tutors and the coordinator, promoting a relaxed atmosphere. The first afternoon tea of each RAS cycle is perceived to be particularly important in initiating a good relationship between the tutors and students.

The very first meeting we all have a longer afternoon tea and we get the tutors to say who they are, where they're from and a little about what their subject is, and then we get the students to say what year they're in ... and anything they'd like to tell us ... It breaks the ice ... It's a little bit of a get to know each other. (RAS coordinator)

The afternoon food is good, we are tired, we eat, and after that we can become fresh.
(RAS student)

Although the tutors were older than the students and in some cases acting as their classroom teachers while on practicum, the RAS students all addressed the tutors by their first name at the tutoring centre. This assisted in reducing the power differential between tutor and student, which was so important in developing a positive dynamic in the workings of the centre.

At the beginning of each session, the coordinator asked the students about the type of assistance they required. Generally, this meant students within the same year stayed together as they often had similar needs. Students then went to the venue within the centre that best suited their needs. For example, at this site, the computer room was made available to students and tutors, enabling students to undertake research for assignments. It was also used for computer-based tuition; tutors, for example, showed students how to search the internet. General classroom space was also available for tutoring sessions that required less specialized equipment.

All tutors had participated in focused literacy training provided by the ALNF. However, students generally worked with tutors with specialist KLA (Key Learning Area) knowledge in the first instance. If unavailable, they still relied on the tutors to assist them. As one tutor pointed out, “My background is business and geography ... but I’ve found myself doing mathematics and helping out with their life management classes.” She, like the other tutors, also found resourceful ways to provide assistance when tutoring outside of her field stating, “My dad’s a maths teacher, so there have been a few moments when I get him on the phone”. Also, because of the youth of the tutors, their own school days were in the relatively recent past; a benefit of using university students. Hence, it was likely that they could remember how to undertake particular activities from their own experiences at school.

The juniors don’t have a text book to take home, so if they don’t take down the information correctly off the board, then hopefully the old ‘what I did at school’ kicks in.
(RAS tutor)

They’ve done it not long ago. They’re only 22 or so. The tutors finished their [Higher School] Certificate not that long ago ... Even if it’s not their teaching method [that they were providing support for] they would have done it not so long ago. (RAS coordinator)

Additionally, as pointed out by the coordinator, even if the tutors had insufficient knowledge of a particular KLA, they had a solid grasp of the English language and could help ‘break down’ and explain questions and/or the requirements of an activity.

At the time of the research, four tutors were operating at this site’s tutoring centre. This number broadened the knowledge base available for the students. If one was unsure of how to assist, there were other tutors present who could be called on to support the student. This was a clear advantage of the RAS program: multiple tutors with a broad knowledge base were all available at the one site at the same time. This was also seen as a clear advantage by the participants at the centre.

I can say I don't know what this wants. This is PD/H/PD. I don't know what to do ... [but] ... I've got someone here who knows what to do. (RAS coordinator)

Even the other teacher [tutor] who comes from the uni, they help us because you know all the teachers from some subjects and others not ... for every subject there's different teacher ... people can help you in maths and science. (RAS student)

Although the tutoring session officially began at 2:30pm and concluded at 4pm, student enthusiasm meant that often the tutoring continued until 4:30pm. The fact that students wanted to stay longer was indicative of what they perceived that they gained from attending. Rarely do young people want to stay at school longer than required. As was stated by the coordinator, "I suppose it's a good recommendation for the program when the kids want to stay." This was reinforced by a RAS tutor who claimed, "They are all really enthusiastic about it. They're always here early; eager to get started ... They don't want to leave." (Tutor 2)

At the conclusion of the tutoring time, the coordinator and tutors participated in a debriefing session at which time any difficulties or problems that either the tutors or students were experiencing were discussed. This highlighted for the coordinator whether any particular student's needs required follow-up; for instance, a student may have required a particular resource from a classroom teacher to catch up on work missed or not understood.

Even if we miss a movie or a listening test we can practise, like there's a quiet room for practising ... We can practise it there and if we miss a movie we can watch it there. (RAS student)

We normally have a chat between the tutor and coordinating teacher afterwards, you know, who's having trouble with what, and what are you doing with the students, who needs extra help next week. (RAS tutor)

The debriefing also highlighted whether any particular resources were required for the students for the following session. In this way, RAS supported teaching and learning in the school by following up on issues that arose for the students. It also provided an additional means of monitoring student progress and identifying particular learning needs; an invaluable asset considering that many children who struggle in mainstream classes are rarely provided with on-going, focused support and unfortunately often fall by the wayside due to limited human resources and insufficient time.

Why the Program was successful at this site

There were numerous reasons why the program was perceived to be successful at this site, and several of these were commonly mentioned by the participants. The key comments related to factors associated with the coordinator, the flexibility of the program, the development of a collegial learning culture, the free academic support and the strong motivations of the students. These are discussed below.

Effective coordinator

An important factor to the success of any program of this nature is the commitment, organizational capacity and reputation of the individual/s coordinating and implementing the program. At this site, the coordinator's attributes and hard work were perceived as key factors in developing, promoting and maintaining the RAS program and its excellent reputation in the school community. Additionally, awareness of diversity and social justice were seen as crucial to the coordinator's role.

A lot of it has to do with the person running it. [The coordinator] has a really great reputation with all the ESL kids ... As educators, one of the best things that you can have is a good relationship with the kids and that's going to drive a lot of them into wanting to come of an afternoon. (Classroom teacher)

Another reason why it works well here is my teacher coordinator. She's an amazing woman and she works really hard with the students to get them through school ... I think the kids recognize that and they see her involvement in the RAS program, so it's already got credibility with them before they start... [she] is well respected around the school across the faculties so people are prepared to come on board. (Principal)

She's very experienced. She spends so much time with them and does so much for them ... And she's very culturally and religiously sensitive. (Classroom teacher)

Flexibility of the program

One of the key points raised was that the success of RAS was a result of the flexibility of the program. No set program was delivered to the students and there was no expectation that the students would participate in any particular way. RAS at this site was in the main, student directed. Although the coordinator and tutors offered different kinds of literacy/numeracy-based work for the students to do, the students exhibited a strong preference to obtain assistance where they felt they had a particular need.

When you come to the homework centre, and you say [to the students] do you want to do some extra English or some extra maths, nine times out of ten they'll say no I have an assessment due for textiles. I have an assignment for PD/H/PE. I have a science assignment. I want to do that. (RAS coordinator)

We find we're helping a lot with assignments ... We work through with the students the tasks that they're working on. It changes every week ... We're very flexible to the students' needs ... and the way that we organize it every week. (RAS tutor)

Our assignments, they're going to check it for us and help us with the language ... so they're helping us to do our assignment. We can understand it better. (RAS student)

The kids are coming along with their relevant school-work, where they're encountering difficulties and so it's really meaningful because it's connected with what they're doing every day in school and they're identifying where the need is. (Principal)

The flexibility of the program also meant that some students could attend the centre without necessarily being required to, or wanting to, work with a tutor.

The other interesting thing sometimes I ask what the kids need help with and they say I don't need any help miss, I just want to come here and work. And I say that's alright ... It's like they just want to be part of it, they don't actually need help ... Maybe it's just the feeling of working with the group and they don't muck around or anything; they actually do get on and do the work. (RAS coordinator)

Another perceived reason for the success of the program was that the tuition catered to the needs of individuals and this occurred in a space with small group instruction where students were not embarrassed or afraid to ask questions. As one tutor pointed out, this was particularly important when students were undertaking topics that required knowledge of Australian culture or history, and where the refugee students possessed little cultural capital. It also allowed time for tutors to capitalize on 'teachable moments' where as one tutor pointed out, "Sometimes I'll use expressions and they say, 'Miss, we don't know what that means', and I say, 'Excellent! Well let me give you an example'". This flexibility and attention to individual needs were illustrated by comments such as:

Like when you have assignment and it needs ideas and you not know it well. Like we're not going [to] know the history of Australia well, they [the tutors] got ... stuff. (RAS student)

The first week, we just want them to sit next to us and really helping. But after that, you can do it by yourself, and I'm ok I can do it by myself ... And at the end they can check your work. (RAS student)

The small groups, not in a big class of thirty kids ... there's more opportunity to ask questions. You feel comfortable, safe, confident, able to ask questions and not feel frightened to ask questions. It's a less formal teaching situation. (RAS coordinator)

Everyday practices, which are not considered by English-speaking students and teachers who have been immersed in the culture of schooling in Australia for many years, often posed problems for the refugee students. For instance, one tutor talked about the difficulty of being able to recognize that an activity was finished or ready for submission for grading. He highlighted how tutors were able to provide support and encouragement in relation to task closure, which was a very individual need depending entirely on the context and requirements of the task.

I think closure is a big thing ... They don't know whether they've finished something or not. I know that sounds a bit strange if they're not sure exactly what's been asked of them. Someone says oh you just do this and you're done then that's a good feeling to have finished something off ... Once a week if they have someone who can work through and ... finalize their work and finalize assessments that they've been working on during the week, even if it's just a bit of closure on things, I think that that's a good feeling to have. (Classroom teacher)

The friendly environment

Another aspect of the tutoring centre that promoted its popularity was the friendly and easy-going environment. As one classroom teacher articulated, “I’ve noticed that it’s a happy atmosphere. It’s a friendly atmosphere”. Undoubtedly, this was also partly due to the rapport developed and enhanced by the informal afternoon tea, but also by the tutor-student relationship. The relative youth of the tutors and the methods of tuition positively affected the power dynamic operating in the centre. This was noted by tutors, teachers and students.

It’s a really social program. ... They are so eager to get here and they all crowd around and it’s really chatty and everyone is having a laugh and a joke. We all have a laugh before we hit serious business ... There’s always a really positive vibe. (RAS tutor)

It’s good because it’s a relaxed and flexible environment. It’s not teacher out the front – that formality of teaching. It’s more like a friend being helped by a friend kind-of-thing. (RAS tutor)

The tutors are young and I think they [RAS students] like people closer to their age ... Some of them [students] are twenty ... So there’s not much of an age difference and I think that works well. (Classroom teacher)

Because they are young, we can have better communication. (RAS student)

Provision of academic and social support network

The tutoring sessions provided students with a social and academic support network. Not only were students in the same year working together, but as the centre included students from a range of year levels there was considerable interaction between individuals from different ages, abilities and backgrounds. On another level, as one tutor pointed out, the fact that the students were all refugees also potentially provided a common bond. The social aspect was illustrated by comments such as:

We’re all together ... We wish to come always. There is not one week when we don’t come. (RAS student)

They enjoy the social aspect of it. We have the food just before they start tutoring. A lot of kids come to that social part and then leave sometimes if they’ve got no work to do. And some of the senior kids who’ve been doing it for a few years come ... So it’s really developed a really good culture amongst the students which is really important. And we’ve had kids from previous years, who’ve gone to uni come back for help as well. It’s that culture of learning that’s really established in this school and I think that’s a great deal to do with [the coordinator]. (Classroom teacher)

The kids all come to eat and they have a chat ... I guess it puts them in contact with each other ... The first ten-fifteen minutes of RAS is very good and very interesting ... You can see the senior students get into work and model that good behaviour for them as well ...

The young ones see that ... positive role models which are so important. (Classroom teacher)

The culture of learning alluded to above was also highlighted by other tutors involved in the program. It was clear that the students “bounced off each other”. If a student required “help doing one task or assignment, one of the other students might be able to clarify things for them” and “Everybody’s working together”. The RAS students also recognized the value of the group working together.

We sit together, when there’s no teacher you can work with your friend ... They might understand something better than you and we need talk, when you talk with your friends you can get it better by talking. (RAS student)

Thus, another reason for the success of RAS at Site 1 was its promotion of a positive and harmonious learning culture in which adults and students alike worked towards the common goal of academic development and growth. The combining of year grades enabled senior students to model serious study habits to younger students and to assist them when they could. The fact that an ex-student attending university returned occasionally to the school for academic assistance highlighted the strength of this learning culture. She provided a model of ‘success’ to the students. Interestingly, all of the students who participated in the group interview at this site articulated their aspirations to continue on to tertiary education.

Free tutoring across subjects

The fact that RAS provided a free tutoring service that addressed students’ immediate needs cannot be overlooked as one of the key reasons for its success. It is common knowledge that many humanitarian refugee families are economically disadvantaged. For those living in an urban centre such as Sydney, the cost of living is very high and social support agencies have limited resources to assist. Yet, as is the case for many migrant parents, educational success is highly prized (Anisef et al, 2000). Many parents perceive a good education “to provide a stepping stone to upward mobility” (Ferfolja, 2010 in press). Participation in RAS enabled these students to receive valuable academic support possibly not available to them otherwise.

Not all kids are literate in their first language ... but some come from quite well-educated families but in their own language ... So their families are keen for them to do well. So because they’re refugees they’re really, really eager to do well ... I say to them, this is like tutoring, if you had to get a tutor, you’d be paying a bit to get a tutor for a couple of hours and here it’s not going to cost you anything and they can help you with your assessments. One-on-one makes a big difference. (RAS coordinator)

One thing is that they couldn’t afford to have the tutors, so it’s offering them free tutoring. And I think that they want to do well. All the ones I have come across they want to do well. That’s why this program is beneficial. (RAS tutor)

Success and work ethic

The success of RAS cannot only be attributed solely to the actions of the adults involved; it was also successful because of the attitudes of the students. Students who attended regularly and thus gained most benefit from the program were generally highly self-motivated and hard-working. The effort placed on their studies, reflected in their participation in RAS, was rewarded by enhanced understandings and improved grades. Thus, students skills improved as they not only desired to work but were provided with an opportunity to receive assistance.

Some of our [RAS] students got 25/30 for their speech. They're beating kids in the top class because they work hard and they come to the homework centre and they work on it again there. (RAS coordinator)

You can give someone the opportunity to do anything and they've still got to want to take it up and turn up and have that commitment ... I do tend to find the refugee kids appreciate their education more because they've been in a place where they haven't been offered any ... so they sort of grow up and there's not many that you don't see work a little harder than the mainstream kids. (Classroom teacher)

It is clear from the range of participant reflections above, that RAS at this site was highly valued, integrated into the life of the school and worked well in promoting both academic and social support. The School-University-Community partnership enabled targeted assistance to be provided to these students who were in the main, greatly in need of assistance.

Site 2: Research conducted by Loshini Naidoo

Background to Site 2

The case study of RAS at Site 2 assesses the success of the program in establishing 'what works' for refugee high school students at the school. This meets the schools' vision of establishing a caring and supportive environment with respect for all in a culturally diverse setting. This also means that Site 2 has as its objective and purpose a coordinated teaching and learning system to support refugee high school students and their families across the community so that refugee students at the school experience a positive schooling experience supported by effective leadership and school management policies. For teachers it implies mutual respect and co-operation with innovative teaching and learning practices and for students it means a flexible curriculum that celebrates the diversity of the student population while at the same time making a commitment to lifelong learning.

The school is situated in Sydney's most multicultural Local Government Area, with 133 nationalities represented and over 70 languages. The 2001 Census counted 92,420 people (51.5%) living in the 27 suburbs who were born overseas. The principal countries of birth are Vietnam, Italy, Cambodia, and Iraq (ABS, 2006). Other represented groups originate from Laos, Iran, Turkey, Bosnia, Macedonia, Serbia, East Timor, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga and, more recently, Sudan (Southern), Congo, Burundi, and Nigeria (ABS, 2006). Added to these are groups who are not recognized by country of birth categories (such as Assyrians, Macedonians, Kurds, and Tamils).

To be successful, schools like Site 2 with a high refugee population have to ensure that the teaching and learning approach they adopt involves the whole school, that is, community, teaching staff, management staff and students. School and its community need to develop as a “capabilities-oriented institution”; professional learning communities are created around learning and pedagogy; the after school tuition program focuses on school-based goals with alignment of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment. The RAS program at this site promoted creative learning through relevance, ownership and innovation.

RAS Program Philosophy at Site 2

It should be noted at the outset that the program at the school is referred to as “after -school tuition” which the management of the school believe eliminates the problem of “labelling” students and allows for a positive learning environment to be created.

Sometimes a label can be a disable... so it’s not, in inverted commas, a special program for kids.

The program philosophy at Site 2 is to: (a) provide specific assistance through a learning support teacher and UWS RAS tutor; (b) require students to commit to attend at least twice a week over the school year to build a strong academic foundation; and (c) address student social acculturation and learning needs with the support of the local community. This is in-keeping with the reputation of the school in the community for its sound academic standards and its supportive staff and high expectations for student behaviour. As the Head Teacher Learning remarked:

When it comes to teaching and learning, this is one of the most proactive and forward thinking schools in the region

It was evident from my interviews with the various participants that the school enjoyed a respectable degree of harmony where all students, irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, were valued. If anything, the refugee students were admired by their peers. This is reflected in a comment made by one of the RAS tutors:

Other students see them [refugee students] as cool students ... The local students see the refugee students as being cool because of the way they walk, they talk, the way they hold themselves.

The openness of staff and students and the friendliness amongst students of all backgrounds is also mirrored in the school leadership. The school leadership is highly respected for being supportive, approachable and focused on attending to student needs. A RAS senior student remarked that:

Everyone, even the Principal last time she was telling if any student in year 12 having struggle with assignments just come and talk to me ... I will like give you extension or I can help you with that.

The norms and values of the program philosophy are shared by the school community and this contributed to the professional community of the school. It was established by the senior management that the program succeeded because of the well trained staff:

The RAS program has actually been a fantastic recruitment program for us. So they're intimately aware of what the project is about because they did it as student teachers and now they're doing it as teachers ... They also work heavily in our ESL programs as well so the kids who are engaging in the RAS project they're seeing day to day ... in their teaching practice as well. They've definitely built a culture of inclusion with these kids where ... you see these teachers on a playground, the RAS kids as well as the other kids are engaged just naturally engaging with them.

There is evidence of inter-faculty collaboration, a high focus on student learning, reflective dialogue between teachers, management staff, tutors and students, and a collective responsibility for refugee student learning in the school. A UWS RAS tutor said:

I find ... often the RAS students are given a little bit extra time to finish assignments. There is a connection between the Head teacher of Learning Support and the mainstream teachers.

Participants also indicated that the welcoming climate of the after school tuition centre at Site 2 was a draw card as it was also a place where emotions could be expressed through peer and adult interaction and this was influential in the school adjustment. As one of the RAS coordinators and senior management member indicated:

I think it starts from the top down, from the Principal, the senior exec are really forward thinking, very proactive ... big picture people. We are predominantly NESB, we've got a high refugee NAPA, our socio economic status and they've taken all these and tried to make this connect in school, connect to the community, connected to the students.

It was clear from my interview with the program participants (the Deputy Principal, coordinating teachers, mainstream teachers, UWS tutors and refugee students) at Site 2 that the success of the after-school tuition program was based on a number of factors, including the needs of the refugee students, the structure of the program in terms of teaching and learning, and family and community involvement and resources.

Why the Program is successful at this site

The after-school intervention components that were viewed as integral to the success of the program for students were (a) a structured setting for assistance with academic work; (b) a well-planned whole school teaching and learning support program for students with a commitment of teaching teams; (c) family and community involvement; and (d) support from other school-based approaches to learning

Structured setting for assistance with academic work

This project contributes to a number of NSW DET priority areas including increasing levels of attainment for all students, more students completing Year 12 and more people participating in education and training throughout their lives. It does this through products that illustrate site-based approaches that support disadvantaged students' learning through curriculum change, in the "what" and the "how" of young people's learning. This, the participants maintained was pivotal in raising the confidence and status of the refugee students within the school environment. That is, refugee students who participated in the interviews and the program reported more confidence in their academic performance at school.

The after-school tuition program therefore mediated student outcomes. To encourage all students to attend the after school sessions, individualised instruction is offered by learning support staff. Some of these are seen to be quite innovative and staff are encouraged to experiment with styles that best meet the students' needs. A UWS RAS tutor reported that:

The mainstream groups are different because ... the teacher doesn't have the contact time with them and when they come to learning support unit ... it's one on one. Building the relationship ... trust was a key factor ... a lot of patience and perseverance. If they had questions ... we broke them down to the level and made them understand why ... different kind of scaffolding for them.

Further, each lunchtime (there is a junior and a senior lunch) there is a smaller program of activities that include elements of the after-school tuition. A refugee student asserted that:

This school is helpful because ... some people don't want to stay after school so what the school do, they open lunch time ... for those people who want to go and have help.

For example, the learning support staff assist students during the lunch hour in the production of assignments and homework but this also provides "hidden" support by counselling students. As one refugee student commented:

I really enjoy because ... I do the work and sometimes if I got a problem, I sit with the teacher and talk about the problem. It's like ... care about you ... like a mum care about their children ... like my mum.

So to assist refugee students to succeed, there is both individual and small group tuition and in most cases with students working in a designated area, they are able to support one another's learning. The advantage of having RAS tutors trained by the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation means that through techniques learned such as scaffolding and modelling, tutors are able to model/scaffold work for the students. They can help students learn to better structure essays by breaking down assessment questions and assigned tasks and also by using examples which relate to the students' lives, interests and experiences. A wide variety of teaching strategies like modelling and scaffolding have been tried with varying degrees of success.

If they're comfortable in talking about films they've seen or music they've heard, they're starting to feel like it's not just a structured tutoring support time in the afternoon, they're starting to socialise a little bit more at the same time and use language that they probably never would have used two years ago. (RAS coordinator)

The use of publicity has had a variety of positive effects, such as members of the community being involved in the education of their children by allowing their children to attend the after-school support program, as well as students receiving recognition by mainstream teachers for their achievements in class tasks.

At Site 2, all students are able to access after school tuition even though it is the refugee students who are targeted. As such the program was available to all students who required assistance. As one refugee student said:

We are very lucky ... we have teachers like they sacrifice their time for us to get good marks ... this very good.

It's helping me because I'm managing my time ... like I got assignments due 2 weeks like I got 3 assignments due in the same week so teachers are planning with me ... that week we're gonna work on that assignment to finish it, next week we're going to deal with that ... they explain like what I have to do. She fix that for me, the grammar, spelling and she says that's really good or no this is not good information try to find another and it's really helpful

This mixing of mainstream students with ESL and refugee students facilitated the acculturation process and enhanced the social integration of those students considered to "be at risk" of failing. As a senior management staff member commented:

It's an integrated program into a range of other initiatives that we have as well. So the way that we've structured the learning support faculty, in particular our ESL programs to support the refugee students ... the way that we're linking in to our, the content of mainstream subjects, the sort of alternate pathways that we're providing kids to exit school and hit post school options. (Staff-senior management)

Subsequent to the growth in attendance, there was an improvement in the assessment results. Students remarked that they attended the after-school tuition sometimes purely because they enjoyed being there.

Of course like assignments but sometimes ... just to go have fun with each other, socialise, if anything like new story, because I treat them like a best friend anything happen I go there if I don't have any assignments to do I just sit and have fun, we have fun together laugh, stories ... chat and yeah. (RAS student)

After a while most build up their self-esteem and attend for other reasons and look likely to get respectable school results so much so that they are even thinking about entering higher education. Additionally, for the program to succeed, the school

altered its everyday structure so that the learning support centre became the hub of the school.

The school timetable is so structured that students have longer and less interrupted learning times especially in the senior years. The senior school has three periods on Monday for Year 11 and no periods for Year 12. To make up for the limited class time on Mondays, senior students start the school day earlier and finish later on school days for the rest of the week. This timetable structure suited the senior students as it gave them less interrupted learning time which also in effect meant that they had exposure to more teaching and learning options such as use of the library or access to the learning centre. This then enabled senior students to seek assistance on Mondays particularly and all other students to seek support during the junior breaks as well as after school. According to a RAS tutor:

There are two sessions here, a morning session and an afternoon session, during the morning session certain students are pulled from their normal period ... and we're given the same 2 or 3 students every week that we are tutoring in literacy and numeracy so we're going through a workbook with them, one that focuses on numeracy and one on literacy... just to see where their level is at.

The tutoring 'shift' had many advantages according to the RAS coordinating teacher but most importantly the advantage came from:

the fact that we can pair up a tutor with a student one-on-one rather than having one tutor with five or six kids and not being able to get around to them.

The flexibility and uniqueness of the program structure made such a relationship possible which according to the Head Teacher Learning Support allowed him:

to go out there, target students, form discrete groups, staff them, resource them and then bring all these other external programs in and get them to mould in with what RAS [is] currently doing.

He continued:

So RAS came in, niched with the current programs we had in place and was able to just expand so much so that our after school program, which initially started off in a very limited basis, was able to expand. We currently run it two days a week. Even with the RAS tutors when they're not on board, when they are on semester break, the program still continues. We've been funded to continue it and I'm currently even thinking of extending the after-school support program to three days.

The work given to the students by the learning support staff is appropriate to their needs. When asked if anything in the program required improvement, a RAS student reflected:

I think everything is perfect ... don't need to improve anything, they all marvellous teachers ... if you ask them for something, they never say no ... and they never reject your ideas.

The after-school tuition programs also employed learning support staff and UWS RAS tutors who had the skills to assist students effectively in their work, and who operated in a ratio with students that allowed them to provide assistance at the level required. The success of the program can be evaluated by the fact that other mainstream students from mainly Anglo backgrounds have accessed the program as a “drop in” basis. So refugee students and students who have low-income or non-English-speaking parents are not the only ones who may need and benefit from after-school tuition assistance.

Whole school teaching and learning support program for students with a commitment of teaching teams

The program works because those most in need are attracted to the program. Staff provides sufficient support to students and communication between the tutors and the teachers is at a premium. According to the RAS coordinating teacher, the learning support faculty is:

trying to target those students who are in the most need of literacy and numeracy support, some of them are not just our IEC students who have just arrived but students who have been here awhile and have slipped under the radar and have not been able to receive the help.

The school and in particular the learning support faculty are staffed by skilled teachers and tutors. Sessions usually run for up to three hours with the RAS coordinating teacher responsible for supervising the after-school tuition sessions in addition to other learning support teachers and RAS tutors. Sometimes the school was fortunate to have tutors and teachers who were bilingual and given the demographics of the local area, this proved to be an additional asset to the program. As a UWS RAS tutor reported:

I have to say that I’m lucky because my background enables me to understand a lot of what these students are saying ... because I understand Assyrian ... I’m able to interpret it for them so they do understand it.

Teachers and tutors work closely together to define expectations for tutors and students. As one of the mainstream teachers remarked when talking about the success of the program:

It complements, it complements our timetables, it complements the students’ needs, it complements the free periods for the senior students during the day or so ... so everything kind of meshes well with the other. The program itself, it basically runs itself, it works really well.

The strength of the program is the teaching team in the learning support faculty. As a member of the senior management team explained:

The first and probably the most important is a good team of people ... If you don’t have a good team of people you can’t run any program no matter how fantastic it looks on paper. So you’ve met most of the team here ... They’re committed, they’re engaging the students constantly and they know exactly what they’re up to all the time.

Both teachers and tutors demonstrated empathy, flexibility, enthusiasm and energy. This was confirmed by the Head Teacher Learning Support when he said:

The tutors are absolutely brilliant role models; they are very aware, very sensitive when it comes to cross-cultural issues. They are sensitive to the point where they will encourage our RAS students, our refugee students to be proud of who they are, where they come from ... and not anglicise their names which is a common problem with a lot of our students.

The RAS coordinating teacher also felt that the experience of RAS was a good

crash course into teaching students in deep need in absolute deep need and a lot of them [tutors] have commented that they never realised how bad or how difficult some students actually have it.

Further, the faculty maintains student profiles for all students; develop individual transition plans if so needed and engage in a range of internal and external assessment activities. According to the senior management staff another reason for the success of the program was the fact that:

We've identified these students at risk ... they are in a database and I run discrete classes. By running discrete classes I am able to target all my refugee students as a cohort that makes it easier for me to work with them, makes it easier for me to modify curriculum programs and to come up with a program that suits their needs better. RAS has been able to work because I have been able to do this.

The fact that the refugee students were supported is reinforced by the mainstream teacher who said that her task in the classroom is to:

scaffold and to break down their essay questions as well as their homework questions as well as any work in class ... that will ...will allow them to actually cope with the other mainstream students.

She continued to say that:

The advantages are they never feel like ... they never feel unsupported, they always know that they have an essay we can read it, they have a question we can answer it, sometimes we even go to their support teachers to help them understand as well.

So communicating effectively with all staff has been an important issue. A refugee student receiving support explained:

My time is organised and the teachers really, really helpful, they help me a lot ... even my result when I give my assignments they all like really good in bands 4/5 ... it's amazing, I'm really happy.

The learning support staff have a clear purpose, strategy and direction which is reflected in the school's mission. All staff are involved in the development of the after-school hours learning

which forms a part of the mainstream curriculum. Given the growth of the program the only challenge is staffing particularly staff needed so that students could receive more one-on-one support. As one of the identified strengths of the program, the calibre and skills of the tutors and teachers in the program could be affected if there were insufficient tutors to provide tutorial support. The commitment of tutors to the RAS program at Site 2 is ably summed up in the words of a RAS student who has demonstrated not only an ability to integrate socially but is also able to claim ownership of the program and the school:

I feel this is my school, it's my school, I don't care about anything, it's my school and even like in the class the first time I came it was so bad for me, I was like scared to socialise because of the language and ... but now ... everyone friendly with me, we socialise in the class, laugh, friends, I got a lot of friends.

Management, as with all things in the school, is collaborative by all involved in the process - managers, staff and students. All those involved in the management are also involved in the day-to-day running of school activities like RAS. They all share in the common sense of purpose, the values and the direction. This means that all staff have ownership of the program and share responsibility for it. Support for staff is also readily available from heads of department and the Learning Support and Practicum co-ordinators, the leadership team and colleagues all help to maintain this collective responsibility.

Family and community involvement

The Head Teacher, Learning Support attributed the success of the program to the parents and the community:

By bringing the parents on board that's just made RAS more acceptable, we've taken ownership of it, parents ring me regularly, they know where their students are, they know their students are with me after school in the program ... its part of them now, they've really taken ownership of that.

In many instances, this after-school tuition program provided the time, place, and structure assumed to be missing from home. The fact that the support is consistent and regular strengthens its effectiveness. A senior management staff member attributed the success of the program to the fact that:

How we run it in the afternoon is ideal ... the attendance rates are phenomenal ... the amount of kids that are here ... the kids don't see a difference of coming in the afternoon or coming at lunchtime ... they just come, they know that resource is there ... and the community know that too ... they know that their children are in the library here after hours doing schoolwork engaged in learning as opposed to their child telling them they are engaged in learning but they're not somewhere...that is an invaluable link with the community because the different cultural groups that we have in our community are often very closed to bureaucracy because of their life experiences have made them that way.

There is growing evidence that the local community hears about the after-school support at Site 2 from other parents or community members, and chooses to send their children to Site 2 on the basis of what they have heard. As a member of management said:

As far as reputation goes it's actually becoming a problem for us ... The programs that we run here, including the RAS program are getting such a good reputation amongst the community, particularly among certain groups of the refugee community in the area, that we're having troubles with enrolment. Students are coming out of the IECs and instead of going into the programs that the department has preset attached to the IECs, they want to come here and go into the programs here.

There has been improvement in behaviour and motivation of refugee students in particular. As the program developed, the learning support staff have continually sought to involve students and now find that they (the students) come to them. Site 2 is a very positive school and its positive ethos is such that the staff continually encourage students, using target setting by students themselves in consultation with their personal tutors.

While according to the Head Teacher, Learning Support, there has been an investment in learning from agencies outside the school:

The mandatory age having changed now we're having a lot of outside agencies come in and work with us to accommodate our stage 5 students including our refugee students, looking at pathways, different pathways, so we are looking at different courses we can develop ... The P and C have come in and they're doing a lot of work ... with our students.

Other school-based approaches that support the after school tuition

Site 2 has a system in place to help them respond to difficulties that students in particular refugee students may encounter. Even the librarian, has been most supportive of RAS. There are also a range of other programs that impact on the after-school tuition program. Recent examples include the gifted and talented program running alongside RAS in the afternoon which a senior management member commented had:

started through a separate bucket of funding, we started offering tuition to kids in mathematics ... It was about getting kids who were underperforming who in educational terms might be in the middle bands of learning and they might be just on that edge to getting in to the higher bands so it's about pushing those guys. We were running it last year and we decided to run it at the same time as the RAS program so we could blur those boundaries a little bit more. We didn't hit any hiccups at all with the kids ... The RAS kids also overlapped and came in ... It just blurred the boundaries, so we have them in our minds usually due to funding and organisation as two separate programs but for the kids it was a total crossover. The other thing is too I think through sheer weight of numbers they don't see themselves as an isolated group ... I don't get that sense. It's almost like they're developing an esprit de corp, togetherness more than anything else.

This was reinforced by the Head Teacher Learning support who felt that:

At this stage RAS is probably empowering those kids we know are gifted and talented but just lack confidence, lack the language, language is always a barrier with them ... to actually be out there and set themselves out as being gifted and talented.

There is also the history club during lunch. Refugee students have developed skills and interests that they did not previously have by attendance at clubs such as the history club. A RAS UWS tutor saw the lunchtime history club as a valuable experience for refugee students because it presented a hands-on experience. All staff are encouraged to see after school tuition support as an extension and enrichment of their work and to this end, Site 2 have recruited a number of the UWS tutors as full-time members of staff upon completion of their teaching qualification. Overall UWS teachers now employed full-time at the school find the experience rewarding and fulfilling. As one teacher said:

We're enjoying it ... It's quite rewarding, very rewarding ... We're making a difference and that's probably ... the child's going home happy, or the assessment task he understands it or she understands it ... They get a mark that they're happy with or they're satisfied with and I think that's probably the best part.

And according to the Deputy Principal:

The RAS program has actually been a fantastic recruitment program for us. So they're intimately aware of what the project is about because they did it as student teachers and now they're doing it as teachers ... They also work heavily in our ESL programs as well so the kids who are engaging in the RAS project they're seeing day to day ... in their teaching practice as well. They've definitely built a culture of inclusion with these kids where ... you see these teachers on a playground, the RAS kids as well as the other kids are engaged just naturally engaging with them.

Programs like the after school tuition program at Site 2 are able to develop students' self-confidence and self-esteem and thereby engage students in learning because it provides an opportunity to help students improve their school performance.

Conclusion

Both Site 1 and Site 2, although very different in their approaches, are highly effective in terms of their implementation of the RAS program. Both schools have integrated the initiative into the life of the school and its policies. Both have created a strong culture of inclusion within their highly multicultural school populations, where diversity is visible and celebrated. Both are led and staffed by dynamic individuals. Each site focuses attention and energy on the particular literacy and numeracy needs of the students, albeit in different ways, which is crucial in maintaining student motivation and attendance. Importantly in these schools, RAS also reinforces the development and promotion of a strong and vibrant culture of learning.

Although literacy and numeracy is of central concern to the initiative, the models explored in this report illustrate that the effects of the RAS program can extend beyond the academic. The participant voices illustrate how RAS in these schools provides a vital context for the development and enrichment of cultural literacy. Moreover, it offers much needed social and emotional support to these young people who have been through so much instability in their relatively short lives.

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