



## REFUGEE YOUTH AND THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

This broadsheet focuses on the school environment for recently-arrived refugee youth and the factors which impact on learning. It describes the schooling experiences of 88 refugee young people<sup>1</sup> from the Good Starts Study for Refugee Youth prior to their arrival in Australia, at English language school in their first year in Australia, and at mainstream school in their second year of settlement.

### What we know about the educational needs of refugee youth

A typical learner profile<sup>2</sup> for recently-arrived refugee young people includes:

- minimal or disrupted formal schooling;
- low levels of English literacy;
- traumatic experiences such as extreme violence, forced migration, disrupted or destroyed relationships, and loss of family.

These pre-arrival experiences impact on the capacity and readiness of refugee young people to learn and create specific barriers to educational opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

Schools are key in the success of young refugees to settle, develop a sense of belonging

and promote social and emotional development<sup>4</sup>. A strong sense of school belonging is associated with positive educational outcomes<sup>5</sup>.

### School prior to arrival in Australia

Most young people in the study had several years of primary schooling in their birth country before fleeing to another country where they received little or no education because it was unavailable or unaffordable for their family. Prior experiences of school which differed to the Australian education system included:

- mixed aged classrooms in which students only progressed when they passed their exams;
- girls and boys educated separately or girls not allowed to go to school at all. Some of the girls had home tutoring

but had not attended an educational institution:

*“No I didn’t [go] to school... the teacher came to my house [to] teach me... [for] about three years... I’ve seen school ... but I couldn’t go... it was only [for] boys.”*

- different forms of discipline - some young people explained teachers “beat” students when they did something wrong:  
*“In my country if you don’t do your homework, they hit you with a ruler here [motions to wrist] and sometimes here [motions to her bottom], but [in Australia] they give you detention.”*

### The first year at English Language School in Australia

All the young people in the study were attending an English

Language School (ELS) in their first year in Australia. The young people enjoyed going to school, had high educational aspirations and valued various aspects of the ELS environment, particularly:

- the cultural diversity of the students;
- students who spoke their own language and became their friends and helped orient them to the ELS;
- friendly teachers who got to know them personally;
- Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) who spoke their language and assisted them and their families, especially around enrolment and orientation;
- the sense of safety and belonging;
- the flexible curriculum with a main focus on English literacy;
- curriculum that allowed them to experience some learning

## LESSONS and INSIGHTS

School context factors that facilitate school engagement for refugee youth include:

- a school that provides a safe and trusted environment for learning and socialising and the development of future aspirations;
- supportive and attentive teachers who develop strong relationships with students and notice their progress and individual needs;
- a proactive, consistent and fair response by schools to discrimination, bullying and fighting;
- programs that help students develop English literacy while engaging with mainstream subject content;
- programs which enable students to participate in classes where they are likely to succeed and form connections with peers (e.g. music, art, sport, drama);
- school-based after school homework programs that provide additional individual academic support in a familiar environment;
- consideration of pre-arrival schooling experiences that are markedly different in terms of academic, structural and social aspects;
- flexibility to attend ELS for longer than 12 months where required;
- a well supported transition to mainstream school with good follow-up;
- curriculum which is adapted to the learning need of students with disrupted schooling.

- successes;
- the ELS' efforts to involve parents/families and make them feel welcome;
  - teachers who actively intervened in fights/conflict between students;
  - teachers who noticed and commented on students' successes and relayed their achievements to their parents/family.

When they arrived in Australia the young people spoke little English and did not understand "the system" at school. They were not familiar with forms of discipline (e.g. detention), school rules (e.g. uniform regulations) or having to be punctual. An aspect of the ELS context that refugee youth found difficult was the discrimination, bullying and conflict with peers.

## The second year at Mainstream School in Australia

For the majority of young people, the second year in Australia involved a transition from the ELS to a mainstream school. Positive features of mainstream school they identified included:

- different subjects and better resources like computers and libraries;
- helpful teachers;
- supportive friends;
- less bullying and fighting among students (though still occurring);
- high level of English language support provided in some schools in bridging programs.

Refugee young people found the transition to mainstream school difficult. Some of the

challenges included:

- leaving good friends and teachers at the ELS;
- developing the English required to succeed with school work, understand teachers and make new friends:  
*"I think I'm not good enough for my English to go to secondary college... I just say to myself "They... have to keep me here [at ELS] because if they send me to secondary college [I'm] not good enough..."*
- not understanding the school "system" and having no one to explain things;
- adhering to strict rules about uniforms and getting to school on time;
- feeling that some teachers do not deal with fighting in a fair or satisfactory way:  
*"There was a fight in [mainstream school]...teacher doesn't care. Like you can get hurt and they don't care... when you get bashed they don't do anything. They just say sorry and that's all..."*
- having to sit and concentrate for long periods of time;
- having different teachers for each subject;
- feeling less supported or accepted by teachers overall:  
*"...the teachers at [mainstream school] they don't have time to help for everyone... at [ELS] they were friendlier."*
- feeling parents/family are less welcome at mainstream school;
- not understanding why they will not be able to undertake Years 11 and 12;
- not understanding alternative pathways or split systems (e.g. doing half of year 11 in year 10). ■■

## IMPLICATIONS for POLICY and PRACTICE

Education is one of the key determinants of success in Australia and schools need to provide an environment that allows refugee young people to continue learning. This requires a whole school approach<sup>6</sup> which includes:

- A welcoming and caring school environment for students and their families that promotes a sense of safety, belonging and respect.
- Opportunities to participate in activities that promote peer cohesion and connections.
- School policies and rules that address bullying, discrimination and racism in a consistent and fair manner.
- Policies and programs that celebrate and value cultural diversity across the curriculum and the broader school community.
- Appropriate programs to support learning needs, particularly during the first few years of transition.
- Provision of after-school homework programs.
- Using MEAs to support learners in the classroom, act as a cultural resource for staff and to assist with family engagement strategies.
- Professional development and support for teachers to better understand the refugee experience and the educational and psychosocial needs of refugee students.
- Better information and advice about educational pathways for young people with disrupted learning.
- Finding appropriate support for young people experiencing emotional difficulties and/or needing practical settlement support.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

The Good Starts Study is a five year study following a group of 120 refugee young people, to identify the social determinants of wellbeing and to inform policy and practice about how to support good settlement outcomes for refugee youth. For more information see: [www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee\\_youth.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html)

### References

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For more information about the Centre visit [www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/)

