

*Kerrie Melville*

Kerrie Melville reflects on research and experience to support students from a refugee background...

The schooling system is often one of the first experiences of daily Australian culture for students from a refugee background and their families. Research indicates that it is critical for schools to provide a stable environment to support them to adapt to their new country (Mace, Mulheron, Jones and Cherion, 2014; Uptin, 2015). A stable schooling environment is important as children from a refugee background may have prior experiences which include experiencing war, trauma, violence, poverty, homelessness, and deprivation.

No two students from a refugee background are the same, as each refugee student presents with diverse cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds, with differing religious beliefs and a variety of life experiences. This article discusses some of the general guidelines from research literature and some of my own experiences as an English is an Additional Language or Dialect teacher that may assist teachers to meet the needs of this diverse range of students.

The ongoing crisis in Syria has resulted in the number of Syrian refugees escalating considerably. Culbertson and Constant (2015) stated that 'In June 2012, there were 78 000 refugees. By October 2015, there were 4 million Syrian refugees' (p. 4), and a total of 65.3 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2016). As a result of this crisis, the Australian Government has pledged, quite rightly, to increase the intake of refugees, which should result in an increased number of students from a refugee background enrolling in schools across Australia.

Build Respectful Partnerships that Facilitate a Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

Studies reveal that a targeted and holistic approach to education for students from a refugee background is more effective than programs that focus solely on English language acquisition. An important element of this approach involves fostering partnerships with parents, local agencies and the wider community.

By incorporating a holistic approach, this 'recognises and addresses the multiple and complex learning and social and emotional needs of asylum seeker and refugee-background students' (Block, Cross, Riggs and Gibbs, p. 1340, 2014). As a first step in facilitating this, it is important for schools to begin with a comprehensive enrolment interview to support the teachers, parents and students. The aim of this interview is to establish a respectful relationship based on mutual trust and to gather relevant information to ensure that the classroom teacher is able to incorporate the child's prior knowledge into learning experiences (Uptin, Wright and Harwood, 2012).



The enrolment interview should be conducted in a quiet area away from the busy main office by the EAL/D teacher, School Counsellor and using the services of a translator or a Bi-lingual Support Officer if necessary. The interview is a two-way process, in that the family and the student should be given opportunities to ask questions. The family should also be connected with relevant local community groups and outside agencies to assist with their transition.

The interview is an opportunity to learn about the enrolling child and to acknowledge the diversity of the personal experiences of refugee children. Questions about the family's background should be asked in a respectful manner and should cease if the family begin to exhibit any distress. By gathering this information, teaching staff are less likely to make assumptions about the child's cultural practices.

Without adequate knowledge or resources, teachers may employ pedagogical practices based upon their own perceptions of ethnicity. Often, through attempts at introducing culturally appropriate teaching practices, teachers may reinforce cultural stereotypes (Watkins and Noble, 2013).

I then discovered that his journey to Australia included a few years living in Japan. The lesson here is not to assume anything based on the country of birth, as many students from a refugee background have lived in a variety of countries. It is vital that teachers have a thorough knowledge of their students to ensure that learning experiences are culturally appropriate and connect with the child's prior knowledge.

Several strategies can be implemented in the classroom to promote a sense of inclusion and belonging. Creating a welcoming, inclusive, respectful and safe environment in the classroom is fundamental for all students, and is especially important when teaching students from a refugee background (MacNevin, 2013).

In my teaching practice, I have successfully utilised a strategy known as 'Think, Pair, Share' (Shih and Reynolds, 2015) which allows students an opportunity to collaborate with peers, time to process their thoughts, phrase an answer and promotes interaction in class. Utilising collaborative group work in the classroom is another effective strategy to enhance inclusion, improve the student's literacy and enable them to develop social networks (Baker and Ramsey, 2016).

Maintain High Expectations and Value Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Diversity

Some existing research focuses primarily on outlining the difficulties students from a refugee background face during their journey to a new country. Scholars argue that this perpetuates a victim or deficit view that filters into the schooling environment via programs designed to address these deficits (Banki, 2012; Ferfolja



2009; Keddie 2012; Riggs & Due, 2011; Rutter, 2006). Focusing on gaps or deficits in students may lead to teachers overlooking the student's skills and strengths (Hammond and Miller, 2015).

I found that knowing each student's strengths and embedding that in the programming, combined with high expectations negated the deficit approach. Additionally, it is crucial to implement non-normative assessment strategies that reflect the learning experiences in the classroom, rather than using standardised tests that assess against the norms for native English speakers (MacNevin, 2013).

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to educating students, however, it is vital that teachers know each of their students well, irrespective of their background and teach accordingly. Additional information and teaching strategies to meet the needs of students from a refugee background in the classroom can be located on 'The NSW Department of Education Curriculum Resources – Multi Cultural Education' webpage at <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/learning/yrk12focusareas/multicultured/>.

Teachers in public education will certainly find the inclusion of students from refugee backgrounds a profoundly rewarding experience in personal and professional terms.

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