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## **Cultural Inclusion: Formal Schooling for Children from Families of Refugee Backgrounds**

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**Abstract:** All communities of refugee backgrounds should feel supported by the state and the majority, and have the power to strive for a better quality of life, while still being able to proudly proclaim their own culture in formal schooling. Culturally inclusive schools appreciate diversity, perceive it as a natural part of a modern society, and encourage all individuals regardless of their cultural background, race, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, gender, or language. This study is a theoretical introduction to the pilot project concerning the expectations and experiences of parents with refugee backgrounds in the context of early learning for their children in Australia. We look at diversity and the successful inclusion of children from refugee backgrounds families into formal schooling by creating culturally inclusive, safe and supportive learning environments.

**Keywords:** Cultural Inclusion. Diversity. Inclusion. Formal Schooling. Refugees. Refugee Backgrounds People. Australian Education. Culturally Inclusive Schools. Safe and Supportive Learning Environment.

### **1. Introduction**

One of the major challenges facing the world today is protecting refugees who have been forced to leave their homes by armed conflict

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and human rights abuses. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there were 45.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2012, the highest number since 1994. Of these, 28.8 million were internally displaced persons, 15.4 million were refugees and 937 000 were asylum seekers (Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2015).

The conflicts occurring in Syria and Iraq represent one of the worst humanitarian disasters of our time. More than 11 million people have become displaced due to these conflicts, with most people fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than 25% of people fleeing conflicts in Iraq and Syria are children, with more than 3,700 children in Jordan and Lebanon currently living without one, or both of their parents or adult care givers.

On 9 September 2015, the Australian Government announced that a total of 12,000 humanitarian places would be made available for those who have been displaced by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Priority will be offered to refugees who are deemed most vulnerable, in particular women, children and families and persecuted minorities who have the least prospect of returning safely to their homes. Australia will also provide support to more than 240,000 Syrian and Iraqi people who have been forced to flee their homes or seek refuge in neighbouring countries (Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2015).

According to the United Nations *Convention and protocol relating to the status of Refugees*, a refugee is a person who is outside their own country and has a well-founded fear of persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, member of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable or unwilling to return. These people are seeking refuge from situations of conflict and trauma some may require an extended period of adjustment once they arrive (Australian Government, Department of Social Services, 2015).

Many refugee families come to Australia each year, from different parts of the world and with a vast range of experiences. They struggle to deal with the consequences of their exposure to traumatic experiences

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and with the resettlement process, which in most cases lasts a lifetime. Their lack of familiarity with the Australian 'system' and the services available to them impacts on their level of access to those services and ultimately on the health outcomes of refugee families. However, despite being one of the most vulnerable groups in our society, they are also very resilient. Refugees have much to offer our society including a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills that can benefit Australia as a whole (NSW Refugee Health Service, 2004).

## 2. Challenges for families with a refugee background

The refugee experience, and the diverse circumstances that refugee families find themselves in when arriving in Australia, have impacts on their health, their families, parenting and other issues related to settlement (NSW Refugee Health Service, 2004). Australian government institutions and authorities provide an important framework for the resettlement of refugees. At a practical level, many newly arrived refugees learn about Australian law, social institutions, norms and society through government administered social services and programs. These institutional encounters are not judged on face value alone; rather people try to make sense of them by attaching meaning to their experiences (Losoncz, 2015).

People from refugee backgrounds are often significantly affected by the trauma they have experienced. Children of refugee parents who are born in Australia can also be affected by generational family trauma, simply by being part of a family that is dislocated, grieving and mourning the loss of loved ones and homeland. Many, but not all, people from refugee backgrounds, including parents and children, will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or significant depression or anxiety.

Resettlement in Australia brings with it many challenges for refugee families. Families may feel further isolated by the language barrier and significant cultural differences between their place of residence and their country of origin. Financial difficulties are common and add additional pressures for newly arrived families. Schooling in the country of origin or

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in refugee camps may have been limited or disrupted, or there may have been no access to education. Refugee children may be entering your school with little or no previous formal schooling experience.

Limited educational opportunities, possible exposure to war and trauma, the difficulties of adjusting to a new culture, and limited understanding of the English language all profoundly impact on a child's ability to learn and their social and emotional wellbeing. In addition, a history of poor maternal health during pregnancy and inadequate neonatal care in the refugee camps, combined with malnutrition and disease, can further compromise a child's wellbeing and impact on their smooth transition to learning in your classroom.

Refugee children may have experienced the death of a parent or other significant family member. They may be in the care of a relative or family friend. Some children may not be with their biological mother because in cultures where a man can have more than one wife, the family sometimes migrates with all of the children and only one wife. Children may have had the experience of being child soldiers. Grief and sadness can compound experiences of dislocation, confusion, limited language and homesickness. Trauma reactions are not necessarily short-term and can have ongoing impact. Children from war-torn countries often come to Australia without fathers, older brothers and other significant male role models (Murray, Ganim, 2011).

### **3. Culturally inclusive schools**

Schools are a stabilising feature in the unsettled lives of children from refugee backgrounds. They provide safe spaces for new encounters, interactions and learning opportunities. They also deliver literacy, the key to educational success, post school options, life choices, social participation and settlement (Matthews, 2008). Children from refugee backgrounds in schools, especially those with disrupted or no previous schooling, require additional support to develop the English language and learning skills they need to succeed in Australian schools. They may

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also require specific support in relation to settlement, dealing with migration and pre-migration experiences and transition to mainstream schooling (Victoria State Government, Education and Training, 2015).

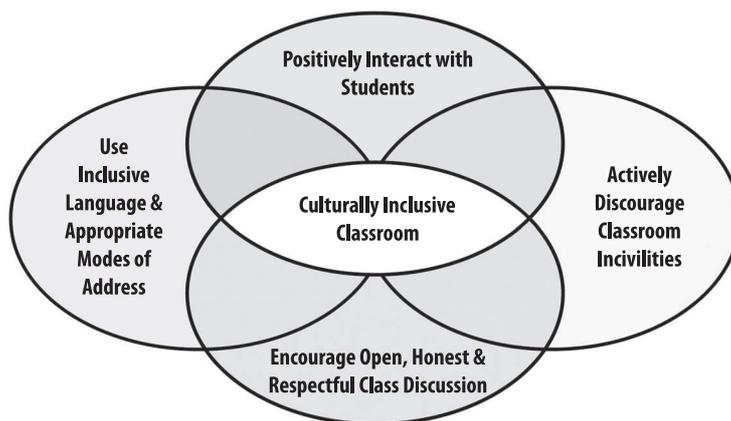
Schools are in a unique position and have a wonderful opportunity to provide a safe and supportive environment for the children and families of refugee background and can assist in rebuilding their shattered lives. Acknowledging and celebrating cultural diversity throughout the school community can foster a sense of belonging and create a positive school culture across the whole school (Murray, Ganim, 2011). Many schools in Australia have worked hard to raise awareness about refugee issues and develop many effective programs to support refugee children and their families.

Culturally inclusive schools appreciate diversity, perceive it as a natural part of a modern society, and encourage all individuals regardless of their cultural background, race, ethnicity, religion, beliefs, gender, or language. Abood et al. (2011) mention that inclusion also involves taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity in curriculum decision-making processes. The intent is to ensure that all children have equitable access to resources and participation, and that educators make curriculum decisions that uphold all children's rights to have their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths acknowledged and valued, and respond to the complexity of children's families' lives.

### ***Creating a Culturally Inclusive Classroom Environment***

A culturally inclusive classroom is one where children and staff alike recognise, appreciate and capitalise on diversity so as to enrich the overall learning experience. Fostering a culturally inclusive learning environment encourages all individuals – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation or political beliefs – to develop personal contacts and effective intercultural skills (Barker, Frederiks, Farrelly, 2009). The following Figure 1 demonstrates useful strategies for establishing a classroom environment characterised by cultural inclusivity, mutual respect, and genuine appreciation of diversity.

**Figure 1. Recommended strategies to assist with creating a culturally inclusive classroom**



(Barker, Frederiks, Farrelly, 2009)

### **Engage in Positive Interactions with Students**

- Establish an introduction system or “meet-and-greet” process that enables students and staff to gain information about the cultural backgrounds of others, and the diversity of experience in the classroom (e.g., ice-breaker activities in the first week of semester). For example, consider a “name activity” that encourages students to talk about the origins of their name, how they came to be given it, or what it means. This can help to encourage interaction between students, as well as opening up discussion about diversity.
- It is important to celebrate similarities, as well as discovering differences between students. Refer to the GIHE document “Managing Intercultural Conflict Productively” for suggestions about activities that promote the discovery of common interests and shared experiences between students to help build cohesiveness in the group.
- Promote computer and information technologies as an easily accessible method of student-lecturer interaction, particularly electronic bulletin boards, course mailing lists, and other online mediums.

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- At the start of each semester, provide students with some information about your teaching style and instructional methods, perhaps on lecture slides or on your own website. Include details of your own cultural background and any cross-cultural teaching, learning or research experiences you have had.
  - Communicate to your students that you are committed to understanding cultural differences and understanding your own assumptions, values and beliefs associated with diversity. This sends a message to students that culture is valued and respected in the classroom.
  - Provide opportunities for your students to interact with you informally. Before and after lectures or tutorials is an ideal time.
  - Make an effort to learn something unique about each student. While this is challenging in large tutorials, exercises such as the “name activity” mentioned earlier can help in this regard.
  - Display positive nonverbal behaviours (e.g., inviting facial expressions, eye contact, posture, hand gestures, physical distance) to ensure you appear approachable to students.

#### **Use Appropriate Modes of Address**

- During one-on-one interactions, ask what name or form of address students prefer.
- During class discussions, refer to students by name as much as possible.
- Correct pronunciation of names is very important, as it demonstrates cultural awareness and respect. Remember – if you are in doubt, check with students.
- Use inclusive language that avoids ethnocentric tones (e.g., “family name” rather than “last name”, and “given” name rather than “Christian name”).

#### **Eliminate Classroom Incivilities**

- Establish explicit ground-rules for appropriate classroom conduct to protect against cultural exclusion and insensitivity.

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- Communicate, verbally and non-verbally, high expectations for displaying mutual respect toward all students.
  - Encourage students to negotiate an accepted “code of conduct” and set of disciplinary measures for inappropriate classroom behaviour (refer also to the GIHE document “Managing Intercultural Conflict Productively”).
  - Respond promptly to any behaviour (verbal or non-verbal) that could be considered prejudiced, biased or discriminatory in nature. Do not tolerate racist, sexist or culturally insensitive comments made by students. Explain Australia’s laws in relation to discrimination and the University’s Student Charter.
  - Avoid ignoring or neglecting the needs of individual students. For example, ensure you do not have a tendency to favour one group over another when answering questions.
  - Avoid stereotypes and preconceived assumptions in your teaching practices and course content.
  - When presenting information on culturally and linguistically diverse individuals or minority groups, clearly cite published literature and research findings, rather than expressing your personal opinion. Similarly, encourage students to draw on diverse data sources/evidence to develop their arguments and critiquing opinions.

#### **Encourage Open and Inclusive Classroom Discussion**

- Prompt students to ask questions by using open-ended statements, such as “Would anyone like to share a different opinion or perspective?”
- Avoid singling out individual students or putting anyone “on the spot”, particularly when discussing culturally or personally sensitive issues. For example, a student will feel pressured if it is assumed they can speak on behalf of all people from their country or culture of origin.
- Promote turn-taking when discussing controversial issues. For example, ensure students take turns expressing their own opinions

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while also listening to (and genuinely considering) the views of others.

- Ask students how they prefer to learn, and, where possible, examine how you might adapt your teaching and learning activities accordingly. For example, inviting students to write a “self-reflective essay” to explain their learning style; completing a learning style inventory assessment, or providing an online forum to openly discuss how they like to learn are ideal methods to explore learning styles (Barker, Frederiks, Farrelly, 2009).

Belonging, Being & Becoming, The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) has been developed to assist educators in providing all young children with opportunities to maximise their potential and develop a foundation for future success in learning. The EYLF puts great emphasis on the value and importance of demonstrating respect for diversity and cultural competence within your child care service and states that “*learning outcomes are most likely to be achieved when early childhood educators work in partnership with families*” (EYLF, 2009, p. 12).

The Early Years Learning Framework talks a lot about diversity of culture and emphasises the importance of cultural competency to support the development of every child’s sense of ‘belonging, being and becoming’. Abood et al. (2011) mention that educators need to always be looking to learn more about other cultural practices and develop skills for communication, and interactions across cultures. There are some things to consider:

- Parents may come from different cultural backgrounds and may each be bi- or multi-lingual.
- Families can feel torn between cultures. It can be hard to find a balance so building strong connections to community support is important in times of transition.
- In some cultures it is inappropriate or challenging to have direct eye contact, so when you are speaking to someone they may have their eyes to the ground. Looking down may be a sign of respect so if you are unsure you may need to clarify this.

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- In some cultures it is inappropriate to touch a child on the head, or anywhere.
  - In some cultures it may be more appropriate to speak to the mother about the children than the father, however, keep in mind that the father may be the decision maker.
  - In some cultures, men do not shake women's hands, and some find it inappropriate to meet alone in a room with someone from the opposite sex.
  - Parents may not be accustomed to playing with or entertaining their children so do not assume that toys and books are readily available in the home or that this is something children are used to.
  - Some cultures do not see play as important and may not be aware of the educational benefits of learning through play (Abood et al., 2011).

#### **4. Formal schooling of children from refugee backgrounds**

Some children from refugee backgrounds have had very little or no access to formal education as a consequence of their refugee experience. These students will have limited literacy skills in their first language and knowledge gaps across the curriculum (Victoria State Government, Education and Training, 2015). In addition to traumatic experiences of war and displacement, they may lack English language skills and have had limited schooling. While parental support is important to a child's education, many parents from refugee backgrounds have themselves had little access to schooling. They are unfamiliar with the Australian school system, may have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and their English language may be limited. They may feel unable to help their children with school work (The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc., 2015). In the next part, we present some strategies intended to support children from refugee backgrounds at schools in Australia.

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**Strategies to support children from refugee backgrounds**

- **Attend professional development sessions on working with refugee children.** In Australia, there are a growing number of workshops, seminars and professional training sessions that cater for teachers working with children from refugee backgrounds. In Victoria, for instance, the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) offers regular free professional development workshops for teachers. It has also developed a number of excellent resources for schools and teachers of students with refugee backgrounds. These are available to download free at the website <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au>.
- **Designate a staff member to be the refugee contact or support person.** This may be the deputy or assistant principal, psychologist or student welfare coordinator, or a multicultural education aide. This person should be the key contact person at the school for families from refugee backgrounds. They must have a good understanding of the refugee experience and develop relationships with key support agencies to assist the child and family with financial, health and community services. It is ideal if the staff member speaks the same language as the child.
- **Consider small group and/or whole class programs** to increase the child's connectedness to school and acceptance by peers. It is recommended that you deliver these programs in conjunction with the school nurse, psychologist or staff member in charge of wellbeing. Two excellent programs are available at no charge through the website: <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au> 'The Rainbow Program for Children in Refugee Families (2002)' (a small group program) and 'Classroom Kaleidoscope – a program to facilitate connectedness and wellbeing in the culturally diverse classroom (2007)' (a whole class program).
- **Talk to the parents or carers about the child's previous school experience.** It may be possible for a school staff member, preferably the refugee contact or support person, to establish this when the child is enrolled. It can be helpful to talk about the

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child's previous schooling to gauge the level of the child's educational experience. Useful questions might include 'Has your child attended school?'; 'Was schooling disrupted?'; 'How many years of schooling has your child completed?'; 'How many days or hours per week did your child attend school?' and 'What language was your child educated in?'. Often, children learn second and third languages in refugee camps so it is important to ascertain the language of the home and where English fits in the child's language repertoire (Murray – Ganim, 2011).

#### ***What teachers can do***

Teachers need to develop a relationship with families from refugee backgrounds to build trust. It is suggested that a teacher begin this process at the first interview with the family and take this opportunity to find out information that will be needed to ensure a positive experience for the family. It is our job as teachers working with families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to find out about their culture/s, and to show respect by asking questions to avoid misunderstandings or offending the family.

- Teachers should present themselves politely, but positively assertive, particularly when dealing with issues that may conflict with their own cultural beliefs or practices.
- Teachers first need to identify the cultural background of the family. If you are unsure, remember, all you need to do is ask. If possible, before a family comes in to the service to enrol, familiarise yourself with the family's cultural background and have some pictures or resources available to show your interest and respect.
- Show a sincere interest about a family's cultural background when asking about languages spoken, geography, politics, religions, festivals, holidays etc.
- Get to know each child's family. Encourage the family and extended family members of the child to be involved and participate in programs and activities.
- Help children and families to meet and socialise with other families.

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- Encourage families to talk about cultural diversity with their children (Adapted from “Tip Sheet 2. Celebrating Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood Services”, by Abood, J. et al., 2011, *Diversity in Practice*. Copyright 2011 by the Family Worker Training and Development Programme).

International research has shown that parental engagement (of various kinds) has a positive impact on many indicators of student achievement, including higher grades and test scores, enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes, higher successful completion of classes, lower drop-out rates, higher graduation rates and a greater likelihood of commencing post-secondary education (Emerson, Fear, Fox, Sanders, 2012).

## 5. Conclusion

For Taylor, Sidhu (2009), schools have a critical role to play in the settlement of refugee background children and in facilitating transitions to citizenship and belonging. Although there have been a number of reports by community organisations on how to facilitate good practice in the provision of schooling for children from refugee backgrounds there have been few documented examples in Australian schools. It is important to have a broader understanding of how schooling may contribute to cultural inclusion as every family is individual, unique.

We need to respect the diversity of families and communities and the aspirations they hold for their children and to uphold all children’s rights to have their culture, identities, abilities and strengths acknowledged and valued. We need to be particularly careful not to group cultures according to where they come from, or use stereotypes as most cultural groups have many different languages, dialects, sub-cultures and practices within each group. We need to encourage families to ask for support and information and to share their cultural practices (Abood et al., 2011).

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