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Better futures.

Improving Outcomes for New and Emerging Communities

FECCA
Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

Fact Sheet 2: Support for Post-Compulsory School Education for Students from New and Emerging Communities

Education plays an important role in the successful settlement of young people from new and emerging communities. It fosters a sense of belonging, develops language, literacy and numeracy skills, facilitates social interactions and improves employment prospects.

This factsheet aims to provide a snapshot of some of the key issues regarding access to, and support for, young people from new and emerging communities studying in Australian secondary schools.

Education and empowerment

For many young people and their families, education is seen as a pathway out of poverty and an affirmation of their social status. Conversely, lack of access to education and appropriate support mechanisms can have negative effects on the confidence, social inclusion prospects and wellbeing of young people. Some of these negative effects can include disengagement and isolation, as well as experiences of stigma and depression.

Challenges with the Australian education system

The contemporary Australian compulsory schooling system is structured to correlate with student age and is premised on the assumption that young people progress systematically through years of education, in accordance with their age. For students from new and emerging community backgrounds, this structure often proves to be overly-rigid and fails to adequately respond to differing levels of individual educational attainment and competency. Many such students come from humanitarian or refugee backgrounds and, particularly those between the ages of 18 to 21, face difficulties in accessing post-compulsory education in a school-based environment as a result of having no, or very limited, prior experience of a formal education system[1]. Specific issues routinely faced include lack of financial support for schooling and limited cultural awareness amongst school and teaching staff to provide adequate support for students from new and emerging community backgrounds[2].

Perspectives on positive education

The following excerpts provide an indication of what is considered to constitute a 'positive educational experience':

"Education should be a life-long process of intellectual, physical, emotional, ethical and cultural development, taking place in a variety of formal and informal settings. Education must empower people to live purposeful and satisfying lives and enable people to constructively contribute to society." [3]

"Education involves a range of factors that go beyond the content of a school curriculum. It should provide opportunities for social engagement and pursuit of extracurricular activities. This should occur through informal and formal dialogue encompassing teachers, students, families and communities, and through sports training sessions, music and artistic activities." [4]

"Any transformative approach to multicultural education must consider the many dimensions that make up a student's educational experience." [5]

The importance of post-compulsory education

Appropriate educational support for young people from new and emerging community backgrounds is vital as young new arrivals have often had vastly different schooling experiences in comparison to what they will experience in Australia. They may therefore require extra assistance in adjusting to the latter.

"As well as adjusting to resettlement in a new country, recovering from trauma, navigating education, employment and complex bureaucratic systems, refugee young people must also negotiate family, peer, individual and community expectations within the context of adolescence." [6]

Students who apply for, and gain access to, secondary education with funding support through the Commonwealth Government's New Arrivals Programme do not always receive the necessary support to remain in school and subsequently benefit from sustained education. In addition, many young people from new and emerging community backgrounds are at a stage in their lives where they require emotional support and career advice. They often lack parental advice with regard to their education, frequently as a result of their parents not having formal educational experience, or them being unfamiliar with the Australian system[7]. Moreover, adolescence, combined with the migration experience, often creates additional emotional and social challenges for young people to overcome.

Post-compulsory education in school is accessed by a large number of new arrivals, given that most young humanitarian entrants fall into the age group of 16 to 21 years. According to data from the Centre for Multicultural Youth, a significant proportion of refugees and humanitarian entrants fit within conventional definitions of adolescents and youth[8], resulting in a large proportion of young people who are at greater risk of leaving the educational system earlier than other young Australians. Factors contributing to this trend are covered in greater detail below.

Issue 1: Educational background and illiteracy

Many young people from new and emerging community backgrounds have had limited, disrupted or no previous formal education experience. Those with limited or no previous formal education are very often illiterate in their own language. Upon entering the Australian schooling system, they are subsequently unfamiliar with the teaching methods and schooling requirements in Australia. This is often a consequence of young refugees and humanitarian entrants having literacy and educational attainment levels well below those of their peers of equivalent age who are accustomed to Western schooling systems[9].

Issue 2: Language proficiency

The requirement to learn a new language relatively quickly in an unfamiliar educational environment is unrealistic in many circumstances, and places significant pressure on young people to quickly acquire language skills in a time period that is not sufficient. According to data in a recent report from the Centre for Multicultural Youth, 58 per cent of refugee and humanitarian young people aged between 16-25 years who attended English language programs found that their language proficiency remained at the same level at which they entered the program[10]. There is subsequently a need to tailor such programs to more effectively service the needs of young people from new and emerging community backgrounds.

English language curriculum requirements also make learning English more difficult for those students who are not familiar with formal schooling systems. Feedback received by FECCA notes that there is a need, for example, to tailor conversational classes and create more informal teaching environments to cater for the needs of these students.

"Young people who arrive in Australia are usually confused. They've never been to school back home. They come here and are put in a level of English that is too advanced and they struggle."

   - FECCA Community Consultation Participant

"There is not enough support for [young people from new and emerging communities]. For example, from Afghanistan most of the refugees come from a non-English speaking background. They've never been in a school. They've never seen a school building. How can they learn as fast as other people who come with a very good educational background? My suggestion is make extra English classes and further support available for refugees."

- FECCA Community Consultation Participant

Issue 3: Educational needs

Students without prior experiences of formal education generally require a greater amount of support with regard to understanding appropriate school behaviour, expectations and requirements of the secondary and post-compulsory schooling system in Australia.

Due to their immigration experiences (often including experiences of torture and trauma), and lack of familiarity with formal education systems, some young refugees may have low levels of concentration, and struggle with the acquisition of language skills. As a result, they require a larger amount of time and additional support to 'catch-up' to their peers in terms of developing their numeracy and literacy skills to an equivalent standard.

In addition, students in the post-compulsory school age bracket often have further pressure placed on them as a result of time limitations imposed through the requirement to enrol in secondary school and complete a High School Certificate (or equivalent) before the stipulated age limit.

Another challenge often relates to the lack of a study space at home, or the absence of a suitable environment to facilitate education and learning in after-school hours. It is therefore often the case that young people from new and emerging community backgrounds will struggle to complete their homework or tasks required outside of the classroom. This is coupled with issues regarding the greater need for additional educational support outside of school hours in cases where parents are unable to provide sufficient support with homework and assignments due to their own limited language skills and education. In addition, FECCA has received feedback concerning the limited

provision of practical materials and use of alternative teaching methods that may be more effective in addressing the learning difficulties of young refugees.

Issue 4: Compatibility with the Australian schooling and education system

The Australian education system is often inflexible and rigidly structured, precluding its ability to effectively recognise and cater to the needs of young people from new and emerging community backgrounds.

That Australia's schooling system is broadly structured around student age as opposed to their ability or level of educational attainment, is incompatible with the needs of young people from new and emerging community backgrounds, whose levels of education and literacy are often well below Australian standards. Community feedback received by FECCA has highlighted this issue, raising concerns with regard to young people from refugee backgrounds being placed in mainstream schools at a level appropriate for their age but not for their abilities or educational needs. This situation often leads to individuals having feelings of frustration, failure, loss of confidence, isolation, and disengagement from the schooling system.

In addition, issues have been highlighted concerning students who are over the age limit of 18 years with limited prior education who wish to continue their education. In such cases, they are typically denied access to secondary education in school and are instead directed towards vocational education or other education forms that are not always suitable in addressing their educational needs.This is often compounded by the fact that the age cut-off imposed by government means that schools who accept students beyond the age of 18 do not receive funding to support them, and therefore, have less of an incentive to provide quality options for students.

Issue 5: Managing family expectations and pressure

Some young refugee students fail to acquire an appropriate level of English skills and education prior to entering secondary schooling as a result of being pressured by family members to enter mainstream education as soon as possible. This is often the direct result of the family's lack of understanding regarding

the requirements of the Australian system. In addition, many culturally and linguistcally diverse (CALD) families often have unrealistic expectations concerning the educational progress of their children, which puts pressure on students to pursue courses that might be beyond their academic level or language abilities.

Further to this, CALD families do not always fully comprehend the impact that disruptive education, cultural differences, and varying literacy and language skill levels may have on their children's ability to achieve positive educational outcomes. If they are themselves uneducated, they will also often fail to understand the learning process and the educational needs of their children. The result is often that families fail to support their children in making appropriate decisions about which educational and career pathways to pursue.

Issue 6: Dealing with trauma, culture shock and emotional challenges associated with the adolescence

Young people form refugee backgrounds may have experienced torture and trauma or may have spent long periods of time in situations of displacement and subsequently suffer from mental or physical health issues. Many such individuals may have arrived in Australia unaccompanied, and thereby lack the emotional support of their families. By extension, the trauma of family dislocation or breakdown exacerbates their mental health issues.

Feedback that FECCA has received through community consultations has indicated that schools are crucial 'sites of information', helping young people to learn about their identity. Conversely however, the schooling experience often exacerbates feelings of dislocation, and highlights the belief held by many young people from new and emerging community backgrounds, that 'they do not belong'.

Culture shock and having to enter an educational system that is entirely different from anything previously experienced is a also major burden for many young refugees. This, in addition to coping with past trauma, as well as adapting to a new culture and dealing with the emotional challenges of adolescence, learning a new language, entering the education system and lacking family support, are some of the diverse and complex challenges that face many young people from new and emerging community backgrounds.

Gaps and opportunities for improved service provision

"[Young CALD people] may never be able to compensate for their lack of educational background…the Australian school system is geared towards age groups…a two or three year gap is significant enough for kids not to be able to [bridge] it…" [11]

"Support mechanisms are usually insufficient … a bit of extra tutoring for an hour or half an hour once a week is often not enough … Plus support tends to be centred only on the level the young person is placed in … it doesn't address the problem of gaps. Accordingly young people find themselves unable to cope. At home, their parents don't have the English to follow up … and the process of decay starts. Loss of self-esteem kicks in around Year 9." [12]

Support programs – key issues

FECCA identifies a number of key issues concerning the design and delivery of educational support program, including:

- The general lack, or limited availability, of support programs to assist students in the transition from intensive English language schools or centres into mainstream secondary schools. In addition, the language support received in these centres does not always adequately equip students with a level of English appropriate for mainstream secondary schooling.

- As a result of secondary education beyond the age of 18 years not being compulsory, governments do not provide any support or incentive for the retention of young adult refugee students in the schooling system.

- The inflexibility of Australian education systems, coupled with the lack of funding for support programs often results in services failing to prepare students to successfully enter mainstream secondary schools at the assigned level and equip them with the appropriate learning skills.

- There is a often a lack of flexibility with regard to resourcing and teaching approaches in schools to

address the complex educational needs of young refugees.

- The concept of after-hours school work is often new for many young people from new and emerging community backgrounds, as learning has previously only occured during school hours. Due to the scarcity of out-of-school programs this issue remains unaddressed and there are only limited programs available to provide learning support.

- There is broadly a lack of peer mentoring and tutoring programs available to assist young refugees in school to overcome the challenges of adapting to their new schooling environment. This includes programs to promote better understanding of educational requirements, assist students in coping with complex schooling demands, build and maintain confidence, as well as offer support to remain engaged in school for those at risk of disengagement.

- Many educational support programs fail to acknowledge the difference between young immigrants, on the one hand, and refugees and humanitarian entrants, on the other, and subsequently cater for their associated educational needs.

Cultural competence of teachers - addressing and identifying the needs

Feedback that FECCA has received from community members has noted that, in the context of a lack of specific support programs and staff, mainstream teachers need to be more responsive to the complex and diverse needs of students from new and emerging community backgrounds. This includes developing their cultural competency skills and enhancing their understanding of the broader connections between educational background (and often previously limited education experiences) and the subsequent adverse impact on a student's ability to effectively participate in school.

In this context, teachers need to ensure that their teaching methods are sensitive to the needs of their students who may have learning difficulties, low levels of concentration or no previous experience of a formal learning environment. FECCA's community feedback has suggested that, as a result of conforming to a rigid curriculum, teachers often fail to begin with the basics

in their teaching methods, and instead assume previous knowledge that most refugees, or students from new and emerging community backgrounds, would not have.

Funding for targeted programs and allocation of funding

Some of the key issues relating to funding for programs to support students from and new and emerging communities include:

- Issues associated with the lack of consistent and adequate support programs and staff in schools are largely due to funding pressure created through what is considered to be 'non-compulsory' education.

- There is currently no national framework to coordinate or guide the allocation of government funding for English as a Second Language support, with each state and territory holding the responsibility to decide where to direct these resources.

- There are disparities amongst different states and territories regarding the strategies adopted to support young refugees in school. The current approach in educational support funding follows a 'one-size-fits-all' model and does not include a tailored strategy for students from refugee backgrounds.

Making it work

The following recommendations may serve as strategies to improve educational outcomes for young people from new and emerging community backgrounds in Australian secondary schools:

- introduction of mentoring and peer mentoring programs, in addition to homework tutoring, to provide vital support for CALD students;

- additional tailored support for young CALD people with literacy or learning problems, which must be separately identified and delivered as distinct from needs associated with English being a second language;

- implementation of well-funded, more flexible English language, literacy and numeracy tuition programs that cater to a variety of learning styles;

- use of flexible teaching methods and a more intuitive educational system based on the educational needs of the students and their level of educational attainment, as opposed to age alone;

- cultural awareness training implemented across the school system in order to enable staff to identify, and cater for, the needs of young people from new and emerging community backgrounds, including the specific needs related to illiteracy in their own language, low literacy in English and incidents of past trauma;

- a national strategy and guidelines for the appropriate allocation of funding to ensure that those students and schools who would most benefit from English as a Second Language programs have access to them;

- development and introduction of provisions to ensure that sufficient time is allowed for the acquisition of English language skills, developed to a level sufficient to cope with the requirements of secondary education in Australia; and

- additional funding allocated to schools and community organisations to facilitate the development of extra-curricular activities to ensure that students from new and emerging community backgrounds are able to better engage with their schooling community and socialise with their peers.

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[12] Ibid.