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IT'S COMPLEX: WORKING WITH STUDENTS OF REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS AND THEIR FAMILIES IN NSW PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Professor Megan Watkins and Professor Greg Noble present a research-based examination of the complexities involved in working with students of refugee backgrounds in our schools. They discuss why it is both inherently difficult and necessary for NSW public school teachers to strive to meet the needs of these students and their families . . .

In mid-2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated the total number of refugees world-wide was 27.1 million (Refugee Council of Australia, 2022). This number has risen dramatically in recent years due to the increasing number and intensity of conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, forcing many to flee their homelands and seek safety elsewhere. Many of these refugees are under 18 years old, and many are unaccompanied minors. While Australia's proportion of this number is relatively low, thousands of young refugees (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017) enter Australia each year on humanitarian visas and face the daunting prospect of beginning school in their newfound home with limited or no English, limited or no literacy in their first language, disrupted or no previous schooling, and the scars of trauma resulting from the experiences of war, the death of loved ones, poverty and protracted periods of displacement in refugee camps and/or one or more countries of transit (Yak, 2016). Once settled, many may be under pressure to earn an income or to help other members of their family, which affects their attendance and progress at school (Refugee Council of Australia, 2016). In addition to contending with these difficulties, issues around gender, faith and racism may affect their capacity to 'fit in' (Yak, 2016).

The New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education (DoE) now records that there are more than 11,000 students of refugee backgrounds in NSW schools (NSW DoE, 2020). While many of these students are located in metropolitan Sydney, in particular in the western and south-western suburbs, there is an increasing number settling in regional areas, posing considerable challenges for schools and their communities to ensure that these students' complex needs are met. Schools are often the first point of contact with wider Australian society for young refugees, so how schools position and serve them has enormous consequences (Uptin et al., 2013).

Various community, government and non-government organisations have provided considerable assistance to schools, but a number of studies suggest that not only is far more needed (Sidhu et al., 2011; Block et al., 2014), but that further research is required to gauge refugee students' experiences of schooling and whether current practice is addressing their needs and those of teachers (Ferfolja and Vickers, 2010).

In 2019, the NSW Teachers Federation commissioned researchers at Western Sydney University to undertake such a study to help fill this gap and to yield data to inform how they may best support teachers working in these complex environments. The report, *It's Complex! Working with Students of Refugee Backgrounds and their Families in New South Wales Schools*, (Watkins, M., Noble, G., & Wong, A. ,2019) is the product of this research. Its title, drawn from a comment made by one of the teacher participants, reflects not only the complex needs of refugee students and their families but the inherent complexity of meeting these needs often within schools already grappling with the challenges of socio-economic disadvantage, increasing cultural and linguistic diversity and students with physical and intellectual disabilities. Meeting the needs of students of refugee backgrounds is undertaken alongside those of other students, making the task for teachers a complex one indeed.

It's Complex aimed to capture this complexity. The research informing the report included interviews and focus groups with executive staff and teachers, students

with and without refugee backgrounds and the parents or carers of students of refugee backgrounds in ten public schools. These schools included primary schools, high schools and Intensive English Centres (IECs) in Sydney and regional locations in NSW, with high and low populations of students of refugee backgrounds and varying numbers of students with a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) amongst their broader populations. The study also involved observations in classrooms, playgrounds and at school community events. In addition to school-derived data, interviews were also held with relevant personnel in organisations supporting refugee students and their families.

The study examined the challenges faced by school communities as a result of their increasing number of students of refugee backgrounds. It looked at the educational and broader needs of these students; the programs in place to support them within schools; the links between educational experiences and other aspects of the settlement process and the social contexts in which settlement occurs; the consequences for teacher workloads and their professional capacities; and a range of other issues. This article provides a broad overview of the project's key findings with a link here to the full report for more detailed examination of these from the perspectives of each of the various informant groups that participated in the study.

One of the key findings of the research was that the needs of students of refugee backgrounds are not simply the pragmatic requirements of educational performance, these students also have complex linguistic, social, cultural, psychological and economic needs. In discussion with principals and other senior executive across the 10 project schools, the area of greatest need identified was that of welfare, not only ensuring students were fed, housed and felt safe but that there was support for those who experienced psychological trauma as, without addressing this, it was considered difficult for students' educational needs to be met. Yet these respondents also stressed the highly individualised nature of these students' needs with one teacher remarking: 'all refugee students struggle but struggle in different ways. We have very capable students, students that have, you know, not as much capacity to learn as others. And some are very bright – a full range of learners'.

While not news to school executive and teachers, the research revealed how schools are much more than educational institutions. This may have always been the case, but with increasing and diversifying refugee intakes, they have become complex sites of refugee and community support, with greater expectations and challenges. As one principal commented: 'I guess we are kind of, we have almost become a community centre, and this is something that I find quite challenging … So, we get a lot of requests that are far removed from our brief as a school'. Schools, therefore, are grappling with a range of issues that result from these greater expectations: teacher workload, professional learning, funding issues, interagency coordination and community liaison.

The research also found that there were uneven levels of expertise and support across schools, both by region and by type, and related to school and community contexts, and individual teacher's experiences. There are schools, such as IECs, which are set up well to meet these challenges, developing significant banks of expertise and resources, and there are schools which, by dint of their location and demographics, are not well set-up nor well-funded.

Many teachers are providing additional support beyond the classroom in terms of arranging homework clubs, extra work, support services, community liaison, etc, creating increased and intensified workloads which have stressful consequences for work-life balance and some teachers' mental health. Many teachers are providing this extra support but with varying degrees of experience and expertise. Many do not have English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) qualifications, for example, exacerbating the stressful circumstances in which they are working. Many are also finding themselves in classrooms with an increasing complexity of student populations, posing challenges for classroom teaching.

This was matched with very uneven levels of understanding in schools – amongst teachers, non-refugee students and the wider community – of the

complex experiences and challenges faced by students of refugee backgrounds. Staff in schools often struggled to 'get the right balance' between addressing the pastoral, the academic and the socio-cultural needs of students of refugee backgrounds with huge implications for these students' learning. One executive staff member reflected on the problem of an overemphasis on the pastoral:

"I think that when we are dealing with our students one-on-one and we start to hear and get to know them more and hear the history of where they have come from and their trauma, there can be a bit of a tendency to make excuses for them not improving academically and as strongly as they could and … I am going to use the word 'pity', like there can be an element not from all teachers but from some teachers."

An executive member at another school suggested such an approach raised questions about the nature of wellbeing itself: 'So, it is striking that balance between wellbeing as welfare and wellbeing as self-esteem and achievement'.

As a consequence, students of refugee backgrounds have very varied educational experiences: some are settling well, and some are not 'fitting in'. While most value the efforts undertaken at their schools, as do their parents and carers, many are also suffering from a lack of support. These students are also faced with the dilemma of in\visibility: they often stand out – for various reasons – but their needs are often 'invisible', and they can fall through cracks in the system. Many students recounted the enormous challenges of English language and literacy acquisition and often felt underprepared for their educational experiences. Many students continued to experience enormous problems in the transition from IECs to high school and there appeared little progress in addressing these issues, despite being well documented in previous research (Hammond, 2014).

Many students of refugee backgrounds reported the ongoing incidence of racism, though this is not always acknowledged by staff in schools. This racism varied in scale and type from microaggressions of other students avoiding contact and making veiled derogatory comments, to forms of structural racism often resulting from well-intentioned programs that actually reinforced these students' lack of belonging. In one example of the former, in a school with a predominantly Anglo-Australian student population attended by a small number of refugee students of African backgrounds, a teacher referred to students making racist taunts in the form of 'back door kind of comments'. The teacher explained how students would say: 'So, they are asking for a black pen, like they will disguise the racism and emphasise certain things like, "Can I have a *black* pen?" or something like that. Whereas I shut that down immediately'.

While schools provided various forms of assistance, many continued to struggle with developing and sustaining productive relations with parents of refugee backgrounds and their wider communities.

The work of Refugee Support Leaders (RSLs), a temporary measure introduced in response to the arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees in 2016, proved increasingly important in many schools and their broader communities. RSLs took up roles in the wake of the loss of the NSW Department of Education Multicultural Education/EAL/D consultants that occurred in 2012, a loss which has been detrimental for many schools. A pleasing development, following the publication of *It's Complex,* and because of the NSW Teachers Federation's advocacy, has been the appointment of EAL/D Leader roles seemingly filling the void of the previous Multicultural Education/EAL/D consultants. These are much needed positions which, it is hoped, are ongoing, supporting schools in meeting the EAL/D needs of not only refugee students, but the many students who require specialist EAL/D teaching.

Finally, while much work has been done to address issues around the coordination of governmental and non-governmental agencies in the area of refugee settlement, this has not always been embedded well in daily practice in schools. For this work to be consolidated and extended we must enable multiple, critical conversations – between the Department, support organisations and schools; between teachers, students, parents/carers and their wider communities – around students' educational, pastoral and social needs, and

the capacities of schools to address them. Failure to facilitate such dialogue will threaten the stability of life that students of refugee backgrounds and their families so urgently need.

A useful starting point will be looking at the full report, which can be found at:

https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18530_its_complex_centenary_report_digital.pdf

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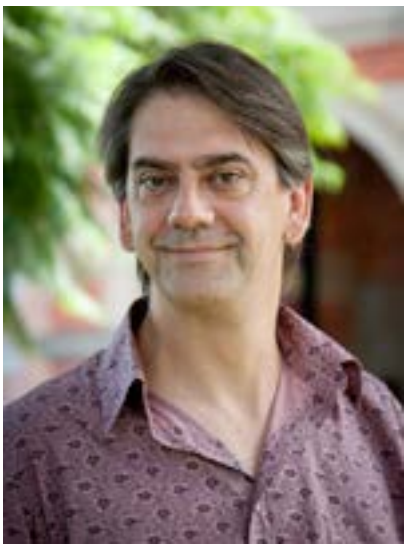

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