



SCHOOLS IN FOR REFUGEE STUDENTS

Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness

by Jenny Mitchell

Each year, the Australian government accepts around 12,000 refugee and humanitarian entrants from trouble spots around the world. The nationalities of arrivals vary over time and reflect countries where war and persecution drive people from their homes. For example, in 1998-99, nearly 50 per cent of those in the resettlement program were from Europe, illustrating the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia. In that year 30 per cent came from the Middle East and South West Asia, and 16 per cent from Africa. This order was reversed in 2002-2003, with nearly 50 per cent coming from Africa, 37 per cent from the Middle East and South West Asia and just under 10 per cent from Europe. In 2004-2005, it is anticipated that there will be 13,000 refugee and humanitarian arrivals with 75 per cent coming from Africa. In addition to those people who arrive under the

government's Humanitarian Program, others from similar backgrounds arrive through alternative migrant intake programs.

The varied nationalities of entrants are demonstrated in the changing nature of refugee students' enrolments in some of our schools.

The number of school aged refugees coming to Australia varies from time to time, but there are likely to be up to 3,000 secondary school enrolments each year of students arriving direct from refugee camps or war zones. What have these students experienced, prior to their arrival? What impact might their experiences have on school performance? What can your school do to support educational outcomes for refugee students?

The environment in which young people develop has a powerful impact on their health and well-being, the effects of

which may persist into adulthood. In general, those who experience adverse circumstances (or risk factors) are more vulnerable to developing psychosocial difficulties. The impact of risk factors is cumulative: the more risk factors one is exposed to, the greater are the chances of developing behavioural difficulties and other health and social problems.

Young people who arrive as refugees are likely to have experienced a number of risk factors. They will almost certainly have been forced from their homes by war, have fled from their country, have witnessed family members killed or beaten, have been surrounded by violence, have left behind family, friends and belongings, and have lived in a refugee camp with limited access to food, shelter, health and education services. In some instances, the young person may have directly experienced

torture. Refugee young people may arrive with members of their close family, with a single parent, with step-parents or guardians, or, in limited cases, as unaccompanied minors. On arrival, they are faced with the stresses associated with settling in a new country including a lack of English, no social networks, disrupted schooling and limited family income.

To counter such risk factors, there is substantial evidence to suggest that there are protective factors that can build resilience and reduce vulnerability. The protective factors which are associated with the mental well-being of young people include their sense of belonging, positive school climate, opportunities for success and recognition of achievement, and school norms against violence.

While many refugee young people do very well in Australia's education and training systems, for others limited or disrupted education in the course of their refugee experience can significantly inhibit their progress, placing them at risk of long-term social and economic disadvantage. In addition, the horrors of the refugee experience are likely to impact on learning, generating such barriers as poor concentration, memory problems, confusion, anxiety, anger, withdrawal, traumatic flashbacks, low self esteem, poor motivation and depression.

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) supports schools in their work with students from refugee backgrounds. Established in 1987, the agency provides counselling and case work to young people and their families, and has developed a number of important goals for aiding the recovery and settlement of young

people, including: restoration of control and safety, reduction of fear and anxiety, establishment of social connections, overcoming of grief and loss, restoration of identity, meaning and purpose and restoration of dignity and values.

These aims suggest a range of responses for schools to consider, which VFST has captured in its recent publication *School's In for Refugees: Whole School Guide to Refugee Readiness* (2004). This publication summarises strategies, which were developed and piloted through a school-based project in partnerships with English Language and Secondary Schools. The project identified that positive outcomes were most likely to be achieved for refugee students in a school where policies and practices were examined from the perspective of those students and their families.

Which practices are most likely to produce a supportive environment for the refugee students and their families? Many schools have the frameworks in place: inclusive policies which proactively value diversity, anti-racism and anti-bullying are clearly essential. So too is an ongoing professional development program that provides staff with information about the culture of refugees, the possible impacts of the refugee experience and strategies for supporting learning outcomes for refugee students. It is important to assess whether the curriculum includes education about human rights and refugees to ensure that all students are aware of issues faced by fellow students.

Teaching resources produced by VFST may be useful in this process. *Human Rights and Refugee Issues* (2004) aims

to develop attitudes and behaviours that promote human rights. *HealthWize* (2004) is a health literacy program for students from refugee and other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds learning English. *Kaleidoscope* (2000) is a group program targeting either refugee students or a whole classroom where some students are from a refugee and migrant background.

Other supportive practices might be introduced throughout the students' school life. For example, the first point of contact with the school is likely to have a significant impact on the refugee student and their family. If the student is arriving from an English Language School or Centre, it is helpful to have an orientation visit, through an established relationship between the ELS/C and the secondary school. Enrolment is a valuable setting in which to assess whether the student has had a refugee experience (and this is where visa numbers are helpful) so support options can be put in place by staff. Strategies for support might be coordinated by a Refugee Working Group which is endorsed by the Principal, and which involves parents in supporting their children's education.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said in 2002 that "Refugee children and young people are likely to have endured changes unheard of in the lives of children in resettlement countries." With supportive staff, policies and practices, secondary schools have a unique opportunity to minimise the negative impact of change as the refugee student moves through his or her school life in Australia.