



WORKING WITH SCHOOLS has been crucial to assist refugee children, young people and families settle into a new culture. SAMANTHA MCGUFFIE from the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture gave this presentation at a STARTTS Clinical Masters Evening.

Implementing a Whole School Approach

Working with schools is crucial to supporting children, young people and families of refugee background. Schools have the potential to not only assist students disadvantaged by disrupted formal education, but also to be the sites where the impact of trauma on learning and wellbeing can be addressed. The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (also known as Foundation House) aims to help schools build on refugee background student's strengths and ambitions and to advocate for the opportunity teachers and schools have to support recovery from trauma. In a presentation given at a STARTTS Clinical Masters Evening last June, Samantha McGuffie outlined the way that the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) works in partnership with schools in both metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria using a whole school approach.

Prior to 2007, Foundation House's history of working with schools included secondary consultation and support, counselling and advocacy for individual students, group work, development of resources and professional development. In 2007 Foundation House

began working with school communities through the Refugee Action Network (RAN) strategy, and in July 2008 entered into a formal partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) which included a four year business plan and funding agreement. 'Strengthening Outcomes; Refugee Students in Government Schools' (DEECD 2008), stated that "without particular interventions at a systemic and local school level, many students from refugee backgrounds are likely to experience considerable disadvantage and are unlikely to achieve their educational and social potential." This document is significant as it reflects both an acknowledgment that students of refugee backgrounds are at risk of being marginalised, as well as a commitment to a systemic approach to addressing this.

The Foundation House Schools Support Program is about raising awareness of the refugee experience and supporting those working in and with schools to recognise the role they can play to support refugee students' recovery from trauma (by providing opportunities in the classroom and the yard for students to rebuild connections and trust, restore safety, meaning, identity, purpose and dignity). This is done through developing and delivering professional

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Strengthening Outcomes; Refugee Students in Government Schools' (DEECD 2008)

learning, producing resources for and with schools, and working in partnership with schools and local agencies. Building relationships and partnerships with schools takes a lot of time, refinement of tools and skills throughout the process, and creating a shared history that includes trust, good experiences and outcomes.

Schools are in a unique position to play a significant role in resettlement, supporting recovery and building aspirations for the future. This is because many strategies that support recovery are already inherent in the daily practice of good schools: providing a safe environment, building attachments and connections, working with themes of identity and dignity and building skills for the future. We are working alongside schools assisting them to reflect on their current good practice and giving them some extra strategies and resources to support refugee students.

Some of the strategies might be quite small. For example, an individual classroom teacher might use rituals and routine in the classroom as a way of creating boundaries and predictability, and focus on creating a sense of safety, rather than the focus initially being placed on achieving academic milestones. Broader strategies

include mapping what is already in place across all areas of the school and identifying priorities to address gaps (eg; supporting Transition between English Language Schools and mainstream school, supporting family programs in the school, improving the ESL program at the school, etc)

The focus of our work is setting up regional networks of schools - the Refugee Action Network Strategy (RAN). The RAN strategy recognises the expertise and skills that already exist within the school and strives to build on this. We aim to build capacity at a local community level, so we work with a group of approximately ten schools in a geographical area and we ask each school to nominate staff to become part of a Refugee Action Team. We work with the teams from each of these schools for about 18 months. We do an audit with the school and training with the teams and help write an action plan. It is based on a whole school approach, so we're looking at everything from policies and procedures, ethos and environment, partnerships with families and agencies and curriculum teaching and learning. Part of that process is having workshops with the Refugee Action Team members. In the workshops staff themselves can identify issues or guest speakers and we work through the whole school process. Those Refugee Action Team members lead this change process in their school.

Evaluation has shown that through the RAN process people became more aware of the refugee experience and the impact of trauma on learning and wellbeing and that this resulted in practice changes. Cross-school committees were formed to assess their support for refugee students and this resulted in schools making changes such as; developing new policies, developing new such as enrolment processes and modifying curriculum content.

School staff appreciated the high standard of professional development, delivered in flexible ways and designed to fit in with their work schedule. Schools became more aware of the role of external agencies and were able to form partnerships to improve support for refugee students.

At the close of the last financial year, 2531 teachers had participated in the Foundation House Schools Support Program. We currently have 43 schools engaged with us across four metropolitan areas of Melbourne and one area of rural Victoria.

For more information please visit:
www.foundationhouse.org.au