

Schools new approach to refugee students

Teachers with refugee students often find themselves learning as much as they teach. JONATHON DUGNAN reports on an initiative to enhance the education process for refugee children and their teachers.



For a child who has come to Australia as a refugee, adjusting to school can be as overwhelming as the chaotic experiences they have left behind. Refugee children have often suffered enormous disruption to their education in their country of origin as a result of war, poverty or persecution. The situation is even worse in refugee camps where there are rarely enough resources to provide adequate education.

When the time comes for these children to start school in Australia, they may not even be literate in their own language, let alone English. Unfamiliar with a school environment and the process of learning, and traumatised by their past experiences, refugee children can be seriously disadvantaged in our education system.

What are Australian teachers to do when they find themselves with refugee children in their class? They often feel that their training leaves them ill equipped to understand and work with children such as these. The child's traumatic experiences and the culture, history and politics in their country of origin can be astoundingly complex. The teachers quickly discover that good intentions are not enough.

It was for these reasons, that STARTTS and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) implemented a joint training program for teachers. Last year, over 270

teachers attended the program, designed to raise awareness of the needs of students from refugee backgrounds and assist in developing strategies that make their settlement less problematic.

Teachers have a pivotal role in the lives of refugee children. Apart from their parents, they are probably the adults with whom children spend the most time. A good relationship with their teacher is vital to the process of recovery, settlement and, of course, learning. Often, strong relationships of trust develop between teachers, refugee students and their families. Teachers also play an important role in the development of other students' views towards their classmates from refugee backgrounds. They are also influential in how refugee students may be received within the schooling system.

The STARTTS/ DET training program deals with a variety of issues. It alerts teachers to the experiences their students may have

had prior to settling in Australia and the consequences of torture or war-related trauma in children. The program also helps identify behaviour that could indicate unresolved trauma such as flashbacks, angry outbursts, withdrawal or extreme compliance. During the training program, teachers explore how their classroom environment, teaching style and material covered in class can impact on students from a refugee background. They are also encouraged to explore strategies which might make their work with refugee students more effective.

This initiative has revealed a high level of dedication among teachers to meeting the needs of their students and allowed for the exchange of a variety of ideas about how this is best achieved. For example, some schools arrange information sessions for parents in relevant languages to encourage involvement with the school community. Others have established



safe and quiet areas for students where

they can go if they feel upset or overwhelmed. Many teachers have spent considerable time and thought on reviewing curriculum to minimise the necessity for students to reveal their past experiences unless they wish to do so. Others adopt a flexible approach to learning, which reduces anxieties. Students can then proceed at a pace that takes into account the disruption to sleep, English language difficulties and other blocks to learning, which may be a result of their experiences.

The short-term benefits of the program have been very obvious from the evaluations of the sessions. These indicate that teachers have acquired a higher level of understanding of their student's experiences and how this may impact of their work and play in the school environment. Many teachers have indicated that the session is among the most useful they have attended.

"This has been one of the most relevant in-services I have attended in my 15 year teaching career," wrote one teacher. "Fantastic-moving and informative. The two speakers were impressive in their knowledge and humanity," wrote another.

The long-term benefits of the program will become obvious as teachers put into practice the skills and knowledge they have gained so that students with a refugee background will be entering an environment which is safe, understanding of their needs and effective in assisting them to learn. ■

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The following case study is an example of one the issues discussed in the STARTTS/DET training program for teachers:

Sanja is a 15 year-old girl who arrived in Australia last year from Bosnia with her brother Ivan and mother Alma. The family is living with Sanja's uncle Nikola, and his family. Sanja was enrolled in a NSW High School and initially appeared to settle in well. For the past month she her attendance patterns have been irregular and she seems more withdrawn than usual. During one recent class when drawing family trees and discussing concepts of family, Sanja became very upset and began crying and speaking in Bosnian.

What would you do in the classroom when Sanja begins to cry?

You decide to meet with Sanja's mother, Alma, to discuss Sanja's recent difficulties. What issues would you take into account and how would you deal with them?

After a lengthy interview, Alma gets your phone number from the directory and calls you at home one night. She is extremely distressed about relatives in a refugee camp and pleads with you to phone an uncle overseas to see if they are alright. She cannot afford the call.. As a teacher faced with this situation what would you do?