

# Refugee Student Transitions into Mainstream Australian Schooling

*A Case Study Examining the Impact of Policies and Practices on Students' Everyday Realities*

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## Introduction

In Australia, tens of thousands of refugee applicants are accepted for permanent protection annually. In 2017 the government issued 27,626 offshore humanitarian visas with approximately one third of these being young people aged up to 18 years (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017). Victoria is a diverse state with 172,336 students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), and 13% of all Victorian students classified as English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners (Department of Education and Training, 2017c). Victoria also has the largest population of refugee-background (RB) young people in Australia, with over 9,000 RB students in public schools (State Government of Victoria, 2015).

While programs designed to support newcomers differ amongst states and territories, educational and language support in the form of English Language Schools (ELS) or centres accommodate learners before they enrol into mainstream schooling. In Victoria, newcomers are funded for an initial 20 weeks at an ELS. For RB learners who typically arrive with interrupted education backgrounds and limited literacy, an additional 20 weeks is often provided. Following this, students make the move into local mainstream schooling.

For RB students, life in a mainstream Australian school can be a strange and surprising experience. Students are required to learn a new language; acquire new values; compete with English-speaking peers who already have significant linguistic, cultural, and social advantages; and adjust to new ways of living in a very foreign environment (Miller, 1999). Students must also contend with adjusting to life in their new country of settlement (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2006) while managing the sometimes-turbulent period of adolescence (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2004). The move from the intimate and supportive environment of the ELS to the large

bureaucratised institution of mainstream secondary school with less personal connections and high pressure learning environments has been found to trigger previous feelings of loss and trauma, to decrease feelings of self-worth, and increase anxiety (Refugee Education Partnership Project [REPP], 2007). Transition for RB learners can, therefore, be a disorienting experience, filled with discontinuities and challenges.

Links between the significance of transition and learners' future pathways into Australian society are often not made in educational or refugee-based literature; however, transition is a formative process in students' educational journeys. The inability of a society to enable its young people to reach their full potential through education can have serious social and economic ramifications (McBrien, Dooley, & Birman, 2017), particularly for RB young people for whom education is an essential part of resettlement and rehabilitation (Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009; Hamilton & Moore, 2004; McBrien, 2005, 2009; Walsh, Este, Krieg, & Giurgiu, 2011). Schools play a vital role in stabilising the unsettled lives of RB young people, providing safe spaces for learning opportunities; facilitating intellectual and personal development; inducting learners into majority language, history, and culture; and, supporting socialization and acculturation into society (Gifford et al., 2009; Matthews, 2008; McBrien, 2005, 2014). These new skills have potential to build confidence for social and economic participation, to disrupt cycles of disadvantage (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Earnest, Housen, & Gilleatt, 2007; Gifford et al., 2009) and to enter into gainful employment (McBrien, 2014). Schools are training grounds for active citizenship (Refugee Education Partnership Project [REPP], 2007): a place where strong foundations for a successful future are laid. The impact of transition beyond education is, therefore, wide and far-reaching.

This chapter presents an ethnographic case study of newcomer Karen EAL students who made the move from ELS into mainstream high school in the state of Victoria, Australia. This study highlights daily realities of the transition journey common to many refugee students with experiences of interrupted education, limited literacy, beginning English language and literacy, personal disruption, and trauma throughout their lives.

Students' transitions to very new social, cultural, linguistic, and educational contexts are explored in this research, as well as the impact various policies and practices can have on students in transition. This investigation was undertaken to understand how to better support RB learners in transition, and was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of RB students as they transition into mainstream schooling?