

A TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE OF SUPPORTING YOUNG ASYLUM SEEKERS IN DETENTION

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Abstract

Unaccompanied minor (e.g. below 18 years) asylum seekers (UMAS) as school students bring a complex array of needs into the schooling system. This paper aims to capture the teaching experience of a classroom teacher in a Vocational Training Center setting for UMAS students (n= 15 students between the ages of 16 and 17) at a detention facility in Australia. The English as a Second Language (ESL) Community Program extended over a 7-month period (March 2013 – September 2013). As a reflective personal narrative case study this paper provides insight into how the ontological security paradigm was used to support UMAS students. UMAS students have complex needs from mental health to English language deficits and face continual challenges at all levels of their reintegration and settlement. Findings highlight that direct and explicit teacher training is required to assist UMAS students.

Introduction

During 2011-2012 a total of 7,159 asylum seekers arrived in Australia by boat; a number that increased from only 60 in 2002-2003 (Parliament of Australia, 2013). Approximately 889 asylum seekers were registered as unaccompanied minors (i.e., below 18 years) (hereafter UMAS) (Crock & Kenny, 2012). UMAS who arrive in Australia face extraordinary challenges including past trauma, pre-immigration stress, and prolonged detention with no certainty of a release date. Additionally, they are faced with social barriers such as being labeled a refugee, illegal immigrant, have limited positive social participation in the community and at times are subject to overt racism (Hadgkiss, Lethborg, Al-Mousa, & Marck, 2012; Mansouri & Skrbis, 2013; Newman, 2013). Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) (2004) alongside other contemporary scholarship argue that schools (i.e., curriculum, teachers and school as an institution) are well positioned to respond to the complex needs of UMAS as students as they are best suited to provide language skills, create a positive bridge into the community and maintain a supporting/caring community around them (Bond et al., 2007; Stewart, 2011). However, despite the great numbers of UMAS attending schools in Australia, little is known in terms of the process or the pragmatics of what it means to support UMAS students at the various levels (i.e., curriculum, teacher and school) (Arnot, Pinson, & Candappa, 2009). Further, to date there is no information in terms of how education needs to be conceptualized to primarily address and cater for the diverse needs of UMAS students.

At a curriculum level

Studies have drawn attention to heightened feelings of stress, fear and anxiety experienced by children and adolescents in refugee detention facilities (Gale, Bolzan, & Momartin, 2010; Hodes, 2010; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004; VFST, 2004). The National Inquiry into Children in Immigration found that young detainees were vulnerable to high levels of depression, as well as other health problems, including nightmares, bed-wetting, dissociative behaviour, emotional numbing and a sense of hopelessness (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004). Thomas and Lau (2002) reported that 34% of adolescent and young refugees from Afghanistan met criteria for one or both of post-traumatic stress disorder (hereafter PTSD) and major depression associated with pre-migration trauma. There are also numerous studies confirming a correlation between confinement in immigration detention facilities and adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, severe depression and PTSD (Australian Psychological Society, 2008; Hodes, 2010; Newman, 2013; Silove, Austin, & Steel, 2007; Thomas & Lau, 2002). However, very little is known about how to set up curriculum to address these needs and how to use curriculum to support UMAS

students within a closed detention facility, including what teaching strategies to employ and what outcomes to work towards.

What is clear from studies on children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds is that they have unique concerns and needs as a result of their traumatic experiences (Hones, 2007; MacNevin, 2012; Medley, 2012; Reakes, 2007; Stewart, 2011; Taylor, 2008). These experiences commonly include exposure to war and violence, long periods of separation from family and friends, witnessing organized violence, loss of security within their own homes and country and potentially, a perilous 'flight' to a new country (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Hodes, 2010; MacNevin, 2012; Newman, 2013; Stewart, 2011). Trauma is one experience that appears to be salient and common among most UMAS students and is found to have a significant negative impact on children from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds as it hinders them in reaching their full potential and their motivation to positively function and learn in school settings (Finn, 2010; Medley, 2012; Perry, 2006; VFST, 1996; Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 2007).

Gale et al. (2010) has also observed that detention can result in a "disruption and thwarting of connection in young people to their family, self and culture, with subsequent impacts on their feelings of self-identity" (p. 30). Anxiety related issues in young asylum seekers in detention have been coupled with feelings of uncertainty about their future, concomitant with repatriation concerns and their indefinite confinement and lack of clarity around their legal position - all of these concerns are claimed to lead to further alienation and self-exclusion (Australian Psychological Society, 2008; Gale et al., 2010; Hodes, 2010; VFST, 2007). Thus, past experiences coupled with new transitional anxieties put UMAS students at a great risk of disengagement from school, disinterest in content and are likely to lead to a total disconnection to formal learning and to their new community. Thus, the school curriculum (i.e., over and above teacher and school culture) while not clinical or therapeutic, must address and position itself to support and alleviate some of these concerns.

At a teacher level

Despite the unique social and psychological needs of people from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, school teachers are argued to be well positioned to support UMAS students. Teachers are claimed to provide frontline positive personnel support, act as positive role models, be mentors and facilitators of learning fostering positive relationships between students and providing one-on-one support (Lucey, Chaffee, Terry, Le Marbre, Stone, & Wiencek, 2000; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Stewart, 2011; Silove et al., 2007; VFST, 2004). More importantly, for teachers working with students from refugee and asylum seeking backgrounds, carrying out these responsibilities are made problematic by the fact that they have to respond to an array of challenges from social and emotional needs to providing and catering to their complex cultural needs (Yoon, 2008).

Coupled with the above mentioned mental health concerns, UMAS students also have gaps in their formal education, disrupted educational pathways, limited literacy and numeracy skills in their first language, negative school experiences and acculturation challenges (Bond et al., 2007; Reakes, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2011; MacNevin, 2012; VFST, 2004). Thus, teachers experience significant difficulties in having to constantly adjust their practice to meet the individual needs of UMAS students (Ofsted, 2003; Reakes, 2007; Stewart, 2011; Taylor, 2008; VFST, 2004, 2007). Studies have found that teachers often report that they do not have the appropriate skills to attend to the academic and/or emotional needs of refugee and asylum seeking students and that they are ill-equipped and under-resourced to respond to their complex needs (Hughes & Beirens, 2007; MacNevin, 2012; Ofsted, 2003; Reakes, 2007; Taylor, 2008). MacNevin (2011) pointed out that teaching refugee students requires teachers to learn a whole new set of skills and use different tools. But no specific training is provided to teachers to fully and adequately support UMAS students. Currently there is a paucity of research that contends with the challenges of teaching UMAS students living in closed detention.

At a school level

Given that schooling in Australia is compulsory and mandated, schools must attend to the various social and emotional needs of UMAS students so as to assist them to successfully engage in

learning and to be a positive bridge into their new community (Finn, 2010; Hughes & Beirens, 2007; Lucey et al. 2000; MacNevin, 2012; Ofsted, 2003; Reakes, 2007, VFST, 2004). Importantly, schools have been found to be of significant value to refugee youth in terms of providing: essential language skills; rituals as a sense of rhythmic consistency; stability and certainty of things through timetable and peer support by interacting with others; and, the provision of pastoral care support. All these, collectively, are argued to lead to a sense of safety and a sense of belonging, which is likely to assist UMAS students to develop self-confidence and their own self-expression (Bond et al., 2007; Finn, 2010; Hones, 2007; Hughes & Beirens, 2007; MacNevin, 2012; Ofsted, 2003; Stewart, 2011; VFST, 2004). However, there is no overarching framework or theoretical paradigm that underpins the role of a school to directly cater for the needs of UMAS students. And further, no research is available in the public domain that examines how closed detention impacts schooling for UMAS students.

Ontological security paradigm as a framework

Of the many theoretical concepts, ontological security is one such paradigm that can both account for UMAS student experiences and assist teachers to support them (Kinnvall & Linden, 2010; Thompson & Walsh, 2010). Ontological security, as per Giddens (1991), is a person's fundamental sense of safety in the world. To be ontologically secure means to have a "security of being, a sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be" (Kinnvall & Linden, 2010, p. 598), and "the self-belief to rise to the challenges of changes, conflicts and losses that will inevitably feature as part of human existence" (Thompson & Walsh, 2010, p. 380). As a result of the multiple, emergent and ongoing issues acting upon asylum seekers, their very ontological security is under a continual threat (Gale et al., 2010; Kinnvall & Linden, 2010). Collectively, the above mentioned multiple factors can threaten one's own biographical and existential continuity which primarily aim to anchor and connect one to their past and their future (Giddens, 1991).

It is claimed that refugee experiences of ontological 'loss' (i.e., trauma and death, disruption to life journey and loss of control) can "profoundly shatter their own sense of self and self-identity" (Lucey et al., 2000, p. 10). It is argued that loss, and in particular loss as a result of 'trauma', can challenge the "very sense of who we are and where we fit into the world" as it disrupts and ... even destroys the very "... threads of meaning" of life and existence (Thompson & Walsh, 2010, p.379-380). Thompson and Walsh note that trauma "can take away [our] confidence or self-belief, leaving us feeling very insecure indeed, unsure of what or whom, if anything, we can trust or take for granted" (p. 380). Arguably, maintaining ontological security consistently through all institutional support, especially at a curriculum level, can greatly assist UMAS students.

Using ontological security as an overarching framework situates curriculum into a psycho-social model, where the role of the curriculum is not only to facilitate learning but to also foster a sense of self (i.e., ontological security). Ontological security primarily orbits around four interrelated themes: structure and certainty, safety and security, restoring identity, and building community (Gale et al., 2010; Kinnvall & Linden, 2010). Thus, the task of curriculum is, firstly, to conceptualize these four interrelated themes into what it means to support UMAS students within a classroom setting; secondly, to explore what this support looks like at the level of curriculum (e.g., structure, design and activities) alongside the teacher role; thirdly, to identify how and when this support should end, or in other words, what might be the boundaries for a teacher in this type of schooling context, and finally, to measure how UMAS students have benefited from supports implemented through curriculum.

Study Context:

In March 2013 a group of teachers at a Vocational Training Center teaching into the *Adult Migrant Education Program* were presented with the task of preparing and implementing a teaching program for UMAS students who were detained at a detention facility in Australia, a 'low-security' detention facility for male minors (e.g., below 18 years). The teaching program 'ESL in the Community' was to be framed to support the needs of UMAS students. Whilst no formal assessments were used to identify the needs of UMAS students, it was conventional knowledge that the UMAS students needed regular, constructive and structured activities providing opportunities to learn English and to socialize with others and to learn new skills around settlement in Australian (TasTafe, 2013).

While, in themselves, these are useful constructs, they perhaps do not fully account for all the needs of UMAS students and consequently, did not provide a systematic structure or design in how to develop or deliver curriculum. At the commencement of 'ESL in the Community' (April, 2013) teachers were required to examine what it meant to implement a supportive educational program for UMAS students. This required teachers to critically consider appropriate day-to-day classroom and curriculum responses, and at a broader level, to think about how these responses might fit within a supportive overarching framework.

Initially, the majority of the lessons were delivered on-site at the detention facility, within four multi-purpose rooms. However, after 10 weeks all of the teaching was conducted off-site at a Vocational Training Center. UMAS students were bused to the campus at the beginning of the school day, and returned to the detention facility at the end of the day. Although a Vocational Training Center context may be different to a secondary school, for the purpose of this study the distinction is not of significance given its direct focus on catering for the needs of UMAS students. The program was supported by 10 teachers and in total there were five classes. English and literacy was at the heart of all the lessons and students attended for anywhere between 2 and 12 weeks, depending on their arrival into and transfer into and out of detention facility.

While teachers had the freedom and flexibility to develop and implement various curriculum activities, there were no specified or measureable outcomes (i.e., social, behavioral and/or academic to which they were required to work towards). While conventional knowledge suggests that UMAS students bring with them complex experiences, no information was made available to us regarding their health or educational background nor how to set up a teaching paradigm that might be considered appropriate for UMAS students. No training or information about supporting UMAS students was provided.

Ontological security was arrived at as an overarching paradigm to guide teaching (i.e., curriculum structure and design) to give focus and meaning to curriculum content. All four of the themes of ontological security were implemented through the teachers as part of the curriculum activities. Using these themes through and within curriculum activities was presumed to give students meaning to their learning, as curriculum would be located within the realm of a learners grasp. Put another way, curriculum would be their own working sand pit to make content purposeful and useful. This was based on the premise that, ontological security as a paradigm provides meaning to curriculum and a clear focus to the role of the teacher, for it aims to cater for the ontological needs of UMAS students. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to reflect upon how ontological security was used to support UMAS students, and possibly how students benefitted from this approach and the degree to which they benefitted?

Method Design

As part of a reflective narrative case study this paper adopts an ethnographic methodology and makes use of the researcher's own teaching journal, which included self-evaluations, reflections, teacher-to-teacher conversations and UMAS student observation. As a teacher-researcher an examination of a single phenomenon (the case) defined by time and activity (a program, event, process, institution or social group) using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time was undertaken (Creswell, 1994). This approach is based on Merriam and Yin's (1988-89) description of a naturalistic inquiry-based qualitative case study.

Teacher driven research represents a process of knowledge building through critical and reflective action (McRae & Parsons, 2007). McRae and Parsons (2007) argued that teacher-researchers are uniquely positioned to critically reflect upon educational situations. Teacher driven research is claimed to allow for a better understanding of the teaching process, and helps teachers to build on their own theory of teaching in terms of their ability to design curriculum and make informed decisions in their classroom (Ilisko, Ignatjevo, & Micule, 2010).

Participants

The UMAS students enrolled in the ESL in the Community Program (n=150) were all male students aged between 16 to 17 years and were awaiting transfer out of the detention facility into community-based detention. UMAS students represented a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Approximately 75% of the UMAS students were born in Afghanistan and identified as Hazara Muslims; approximately 10% identified as Catholic Vietnamese; the remaining 15% identified with countries including Sri Lanka, Burma, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, India, Nepal, Palestine and Pakistan. The teachers did not have access to any information about the students and hence the above details could not be formally validated.

The researcher was one among 10 teachers, and each teacher was responsible to teach one class (n=15) of students. The researcher has over 8 years of primary and secondary school teaching experience, including working with migrant students but not with UMAS students, and no prior experience of working in a detention facility. The study on focused on students who attended school regularly and came to be known by the teaching group.

Data Collection

All data was qualitative in nature and was collected over a period of six months (April 2013 – Sept 2013); this coincided with the beginning and cessation of the teaching program. Data was collected in the following way/s:

- 1) student transcribes (e.g., journal submissions),
- 2) transcripts and summaries of informal discussions with fellow teachers, in addition to notes from semi-structured group meetings with teachers and UMAS students,
- 3) teacher notes on UMAS student behaviors (e.g., attendance, positive behaviors / gestures [i.e., laughing and smiling]), social interactions (e.g., positive peer interactions), interest in curriculum (e.g., completing curriculum tasks enthusiastically), and their interactions and experiences with their respective teachers (e.g., positive and negative behaviors).
- 4) researcher's own personal teacher journal.

Data collection was informed by UMAS students' participation in a classroom context. The aim in data collection was to inform the researcher how ontological security was useful in supporting UMAS students within a classroom setting, and to this end, student behavior and interactions were necessary to observe and document.

Data Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the data, analysis aimed to explore and identify broad and unique themes from within the data as related to constructs from ontological security. Consequently, data was analysed to assist in arriving at a greater understanding of ontological security. Analysis compared all specific descriptions to develop common themes which were directly validated by the participant's description. Hence, qualitative analysis occurred on a thematic level to show the researcher's reflections.

Results

Results are reported in a narrative form under broad themes with two sections (Phase I and II). Phase I – reports on the researcher's reflections at the three levels: teachers, students and the researcher's journey, and Phase II – reports on the use of ontological security.

Phase I

Teachers: Initially, a majority of teachers seemed to be unsure of what they needed to do. It was very clear that none of them felt confident about what they were doing. That is, they were not sure how to relate to the UMAS students, how to motivate or engage them, or how they should go about curriculum implementation. For example, one teacher commented "... *my students seem to enjoy coming to class, but find it difficult to maintain their concentration for any great period of time ...*" Another teacher shared the concern that "... *curriculum content was of no interest to my students ...*"

Overall the uncertainties seemed to reflect a sense of purposelessness in terms of identifying what the

teacher role was in supporting UMAS students. For example, when students disclosed information about the death of their family members, or when they acted out aggressively as a result of their frustration at their indefinite detention, it was very unclear as to what should occur and what kind of support could be offered and/or how to validate their experience and/or assess the severity of their grief. Teachers also commented on the noticeable drop in the morale of UMAS students associated with their lengthening incarceration. However, one teacher reported a sense of satisfaction shown by UMAS students when they were involved in collaborative small-group work. Perhaps this is explained by the need of UMAS students wanting to belong and appreciate each other's experiences.

Students: In observing and listening to UMAS students the following was recorded. Many reported of backgrounds that were punctuated by trauma, a great sense of loss, no particular system of support, no structure or predictability to their lives, finding themselves in situations with no choice in their life pathway, little or no control over their life or what they wanted to do in life. In addition, most reported having no daily routine for years and instead learnt to live a reactionary life to ever changing things around them. They also reported no stability, consistency or any sense of an organised life experience and having no control of their own space or life.

One student shared:

When I was only just three, law and order conditions were completely horrible. The Taliban got control of our village and they were killing everyone belonging to the Hazara community. There was not any option but to take refuge in one of the neighboring countries in order to flee the Taliban persecution. Since the age of three I started living the life of a refugee.

Another student shared:

Soon the terrorism and the incidents of Hazara killing started in Quetta city. Whenever and wherever the Taliban see any Hazara, they kill them. Vehicles are stopped in daylight in front of security forces, Hazara are identified, segregated from others and then killed. We were completely isolated in Quetta. We could not even go to work or attend school.

Yet another shared:

In my whole life I have been witnessing only the killing incidents, mourning and burials. There is not any other thing except these memories in my life. Now, I am far away from Quetta, but still these three ideas always haunt me like a nightmare and still make life a hell for me.

In terms of their past, a significant theme, which quickly became apparent, was that many of the UMAS students were grappling with horrific life events relating to their pre-migration life, including witnessing death, murder, and organized violence, threats to their own life and siblings, and the kidnapping of family members.

In terms of their current situation, UMAS students reported experiences of high levels of anxiety as a result of their daily worries about the safety and wellbeing of their families back at home. UMAS students regularly talked about various personal worries that kept them awake throughout many nights. In addition, UMAS students also reported feeling very anxious about their ongoing detention.

Many UMAS students colloquially described their detention facility as 'our prison' and it seemed to symbolize further anxieties related to their undetermined status and future in Australia. Importantly, UMAS students did not seem to have a convincing positive prospectus for their future to which they could orientate themselves towards – they regularly expressed a sense of loneliness and fear about their future. They seemed to be living a life defined by what Kinnvall and Linden (2010) described in terms of "powerlessness, dependence and insecurity" or "a world devoid of certainty" (pp. 595).

Many of the UMAS students reported feeling isolated and lonely and often shared their troubling feelings of loneliness associated with their estrangement from close family and friends, and further, a longing to be with them again. It was clear that UMAS students found great satisfaction in talking about their families. Often UMAS students appeared very anxious, angered, depressed or

withdrawn. For example, it was observed by all the teachers that there was often a strong emotional reaction across the students following the transfer of other UMAS students out of detention into community.

My journey

Coming to work with UMAS students, I brought 8 years of teaching experience, including having worked in a number of different schools and with different students (e.g., from low socio-economic communities, to migrant population groups to rural and remote schools). While these experiences gave me broad understanding of literacy levels and abilities and gave me an array of useful and practical skills, I nevertheless felt unprepared to teach UMAS students. For example, *I had never before worked with young asylum seeker students and didn't feel as though I had even a basic understanding of the kinds of social / emotional issues impacting upon them.*

Initially I found myself in a very unique position as many UMAS students started to openly share their experiences. As teachers we often became a focal point for UMAS students for disclosure about negative and traumatic events in their lives. Stewart (2011) has observed that teachers are often seen by refugees as the most influential and trusted people in their lives, and may be regarded as their "lifeline". I was always moved and challenged in not knowing how to handle traumatic information passed on by UMAS students, especially when it was shared in trust. During such times I often felt the need to actively help the student but soon learnt that I could only play a supportive role just by listening to them and providing a presence. Even then, at times it was difficult to maintain a clear boundary between being an educator and a counselor. It is still not clear to me as to what my role was really meant to be.

Hence, I began the program feeling diffident about what it was that I should be doing, both in terms of my curriculum delivery and in promoting their wellbeing. This led to my learning journey being to explore ways to shift my own teaching paradigm – from being what might be described as a classroom 'instructor', or, as Wette (2011) described "an authority source and manager of a controlled, authoritarian environment", to a classroom facilitator; someone who would listen carefully and constantly to the ongoing and emergent needs of my students and implement a supportive curriculum. I took it upon myself to support UMAS students and began to read widely to effectively support them. Whilst I did not have any evidence to measure or validate the issues acting upon UMAS students, it seemed to me that their experiences could be best summarized in terms of 'instability', 'anxiety' and 'loss'. Defined within terms of 'ontological security', UMAS students "overall security was under threat and represented a generalized state of fear" (Giddens, 1991, pp. 43-44). This led my teaching to orbit around four interrelated themes of ontological security to provide: structure and certainty, safety and security, and restoring identity and to build a community around UMAS students (Lucey et al. 2000; Stewart, 2011; VFST, 1996). By learning to appreciate the needs of UMAS students through the lens of ontological security, I began to frame my curriculum and my role within a paradigm of ontological security based on the assumption that the majority of UMAS students are threatened by ontological insecurity (Gale et al., 2010).

Phase II

Implementation of Ontological Security (Please Appendix 1 for full summary)

The *Structure and Certainty* theme was used to provide structure to the curriculum. The aim was to develop predictability across and within classroom activities. Having a clear and explicit structure around curriculum with demonstrable and predictable tasks was paramount. According to Giddens (1991), "habits and routine provide a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties" (p. 39). This idea is supported by Van der Kolk (2003), who argues that boundaries, rules and predictability can shield children who have suffered from trauma from uncertain or threatening events that may be a cause of further anxiety to them. Some of the adopted strategies included:

- Providing curriculum outline and structure for each: task, lesson, day and week;
- Outlining learning goals for each session;

- Showing a road to map for their journey in the program;
- Giving each UMAS student a clear timetable and learning journey path;
- Allow time for students to clarify structure of the curriculum;
- Giving simple and clear instructions;
- Establishing clear teacher-student boundaries; and
- Activities focused on giving control back to the students (e.g. timetable).

I felt that having a personalized timetable buoyed UMAS students, as they owned their time, they knew the structure of what was to come and how long and what the immediate result would be for each session; this provided clear certainty and purpose to their time and to their activity. This appeared to represent an artifact that allowed them to look to their immediate future with a sense of purpose and surety. Here, having a consistency in terms of structure and routine was paramount.

The *Safety and Security* theme was used to create a positive culture around curriculum. The aim was to make UMAS students feel a sense of belonging, respect and acknowledgement through the positive interactions. Being ontologically secure means to feel safe, both in a physical sense and also at an emotional level (Giddens, 1991, Thompon & Walsh, 2010). Thus, curriculum was used to create a “safe haven” experience for students. This meant ensuring that curriculum activities were never threatening, or too challenging or embarrassing or off putting or making UMAS students feel uncomfortable or uneasy. This also meant never to work on activities that related to uncertainties about the future or any potential trauma-related issues. This created a new challenge around choosing activities that were culturally sensitive, emotionally and mentally positive and supportive. Some of the adopted strategies included:

Making UMAS students feel welcome and accepted in the classroom;

- Individually greeting UMAS students everyday;
- Addressing them by their name – learning their names and to say it properly;
- In consultation with UMAS students creating a learning structure of certainty with clear set of classroom boundaries around acceptable classroom behaviour;
- Making myself available as a ‘listener’, to be trusted than a teacher to correct or discipline;
- Allowing flexibility and variety within curriculum topics; and
- Activities focused on making students feel safe and secure (e.g., support plan).

Kinnvall and Linden (2010) noted that “people who find themselves in a particularly exposed and vulnerable position have a special need of being socially acknowledged by others” (p. 601). Thus, knowing their names and using their local names made them feel safe and secure and also allowed them to be positively acknowledged as individuals and members of a community. Ludy-Dobson and Perry (2010) supported relational interactions with familiar and nurturing people as they have a “powerful regulating effect” on individuals, and act like a “protective mechanism” (p. 27) that helps people survive following trauma and loss. Such an approach to curriculum practice enabled UMAS students to become more and more active in their learning. Also, engaging UMAS students in the drafting of classroom rules had numerous positive impacts, including giving them the opportunity to reflect upon what it means to be physically and psychologically safe. As an activity, this helped them to cooperate, collaborate and consent to building a safe and protective community around them and provided them with an opportunity to connect and build relationships with fellow classmates (Beamon, 2001).

Flexibility through curriculum, following Friere’s (1970) ‘problem-posing’, or ‘contextual’ approach to curriculum, gave UMAS students an opportunity to safely discuss topics that they considered immediately important. According to Wallerstein (1983), a problem-posing approach involves listening to students and learning about their problems and strengths, then placing these “conflicts [at] the centre of the curriculum” (pp. 5) in an unharmed and unthreatening manner. This led to students regularly taking part in class discussions and beginning to feel safe enough to speak about the health system, banking, budgeting, using public transport, relationships between men and women in Australia, further schooling, cultural rules and making friends. These and other topics

actually drove the curriculum themes, and often led to a field trip (i.e., excursion trip into Hobart city).

The *Restoring Identity* theme was used to create a positive sense of self. The aim was to create a space for students to reclaim their self-identity and to slowly become emotionally resilient. Biography-related activities were used to capture positives and strengths to counter 'loss' and to restore their self-identity – a fundamental aspect of ontological security (Kinnvall & Linden, 2010). According to Giddens (1991), one's self-identity is dependent upon the "capacity [of an individual] to keep a particular narrative going" and involves the "continual integration of events in the external world ... into an ongoing story about the self" (p. 54). Some of the adopted strategies to foster feelings of self-identity were:

- Reaffirming a 'positive and future oriented' identity using student strengths, talents and abilities (Lucey et al., 2000);
- Developing activities around what UMAS students were good at it (for example, story writing, diary writing and art) ;
- Learning basic information about their background, such as their city and country of origin, the languages they speak, their skills and interests, their hobbies and their hopes;
- Opportunity to document positive memories around home life and culture;
- Identifying and highlighting and promoting the skills, talents and passions of UMAS students;
- Supporting UMAS students to link their passions with potential educational and / or employment pathways; and
- Activities focused on re-assuring their sense of self (e.g., map strengths).

While restoring identify after trauma, loss and being in detention is challenging, it was evident to me that students began to think about what they were good at and started to use that in the learning program.

The *Cultivating Connections* theme was used to foster social connectedness to help them to understand their own new experience and culture (Gale et al., 2010). The primary purpose was to build a community around each student, so that each UMAS student could see themselves as part of a bigger community. One of the main concerns UMAS students bring with them is a sense of social isolation from family and friends. Consequently, to increase a sense of social connectedness, curriculum was used to map out the various levels of community around each student (i.e., within the current context of their experiences) from immediate peer groups, to cell mates in the detention facility, to schoolteachers and to counselors and support staff. In addition, connecting UMAS students to social institutions and technology (e.g., Facebook) seemed to be an integral part of transition and some were able to re-connect back with their family and friends (Bond et al., 2007; Gale et al., 2010; Lucey et al., 2000). Supporting social connectedness primarily through curriculum required cooperation and collaboration from all UMAS students, so as to become a micro social 'community' of their own. The following strategies were used:

- Mapping their own community;
- Small group problem solving activities;
- Role-plays;
- Team-based learning games;
- Games that encouraged play and laughter, including volleyball, soccer and Australian Rules Football and tug-o-war;
- Facilitating classroom activities geared towards the breaking-down of cultural barriers, for example, activities that celebrated their cultural diversity; and
- Activities focused on building relationships in the community.

UMAS students saw themselves as part of an embracing school-community and indeed, were largely willing and encouraged to make new and supportive peer friendships in the classroom. Beyond the classroom they recognized teachers as a useful source of support. This led to them slowly get connected with community agencies. Health Services provided UMAS students with a link to several other local community groups (e.g., Migrant Resource Centre, local refugee counseling services,

asylum seeker support networks, and humanitarian agencies, including the Red Cross). Other community-focused initiatives were built into the program, such as excursions to community institutions, including local banks, supermarkets, department stores, the General Hospital, local libraries and local schools. Collectively these allowed UMAS students to begin to make bridges into the community through their school. One UMAS student reported that these excursions “*were the best way to learn about Australia,*” while another said that they gave him the “*confidence*” to move into the community. After visiting a local school one UMAS student commented that he enjoyed the opportunity to “*share stories*” with young Australian people, while another commented that these visits helped him “*forget about prison-life*”.

Discussion and Implications

As a teacher-researcher my role in this project has been to reflect upon how best to support UMAS students. My purpose has been to investigate how teachers might make schooling experiences of UMAS students positive, meaningful and rewarding. I went about seeking answers to my questions by engaging in a research process involving a repetitious cycle of questioning, planning, acting, observing, reflecting and pre-planning (Ilisko et al., 2010). Through this process I was able to move from having a different and uncertain personal stance towards this particular teaching role, to being able to approach it with a sense of confidence. In other words, by engaging in a research process I was able to employ my teaching ‘voice’ (Dewey, 1916) and go about defining an ‘educational philosophy’, and then “act accordingly towards implementing sustainable changes in the educational realm” (Kincheloe, 2003).

Although it is difficult to measure the success of the strategies and approaches employed by the ontological security paradigm, as a teacher, I see positive anecdotal evidence in support. For example, it was obvious that the UMAS students enjoyed coming to class as their attendance was high and they were actively engaged in the learning, started to attend regularly, began to smile and laugh and seemed to have found the confidence to express themselves through their work. Ontological security as a paradigm also helped UMAS to initiate new and strong friendships between themselves as they heard each other’s stories and found a sense of community among each other as they felt comfortable to talk about their difficult experiences, and self-assured to consider a positive future.

One salient piece of evidence was receiving ‘thank you’ letters from the students upon their transfer out of the Immigration Detention Centre to community-based detention. These letters spoke of a deep gratitude for the care, dedication and attention directed towards us as teachers. I found myself pinning all the letters to our staff board, almost as a mark of approval for the way we had gone about our teaching. Many of the students were very keen to stay in contact with their teachers after being released from detention, which adds further evidence.

At the beginning of the program I found myself not knowing what to do, but after listening to many stories associated with their struggles and using ontological security as a lens, I confirmed my role as a teacher-facilitator to have a listening ear. These early discussions developed with the program, evolving into constructive dialogue geared towards finding answers to how best to support UMAS students beyond the classroom. Through teacher-teacher dialogue and a collaborative process, involving sharing and discussing our day-to-day classroom experiences, we continually searched for better ways to engage and support UMAS students’ needs. Having a range of targeted, practical and achievable curriculum-level strategies using ontological security paradigm allowed student needs to be centrally positioned and further it gave meaning to curriculum and located the teacher as a facilitator.

The key lesson I have learnt from this project is that teachers do have the potential to support UMAS students. Moreover, I would argue that teachers are well positioned to play extremely significant roles in support of UMAS students. Recognising that UMAS students have needs beyond the classroom means it requires a careful response by teachers to attend to the various levels of complex needs, be they social, personal and emotional. The strategies outlined in this paper, organised around the themes of ‘structure and certainty’, ‘safety and security’, ‘restoring identity’ and cultivating connections’, are an example that worked in my case. Importantly, I also learnt that teacher self-care and teacher-student boundaries are necessary to not only give support but to reflect best practice in how best to

provide support. I agree with MacNevin (2012), Taylor (2008) and Reakes (2007) who argue that teachers who work with young asylum seekers require ongoing professional development opportunities, such that they can approach their teaching role with a sense of meaning, clarity, purpose and confidence. Questions of whether ontological security is an approach that is applicable to all UMAS students, needs to be more critically explored and investigated in future studies.

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Appendix 1: Example of one teacher effort in supporting UMAS at the level of curriculum:

Curriculum	Strategies employed by teachers in support of UMAS
Structure and Certainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing curriculum outline and structure for each: task, lesson, day and week • Outlining learning goals for each session • Showing a road to map for their journey in the program • Giving each UMAS student a clear timetable and learning journey path • Allow time for students to clarify structure of the curriculum • Giving simple and clear instructions • Establishing clear teacher-student boundaries • Activities focused on giving control back to the students (e.g. timetable)
Safety and Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individually greeting UMAS students everyday • Addressing them by their name – learning their names and to say it properly • In consultation with UMAS students creating a learning structure of certainty with clear set of classroom boundaries around acceptable classroom behavior • Making myself available as a ‘listener’, to be trusted than a teacher to correct or discipline • Allowing flexibility and variety within curriculum topics • Activities focused on making students feel safe and secure (e.g., Support plan)
Restoring Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaffirming a ‘positive and future oriented’ identity using students strengths, talents and abilities (Lucey et al. 2000) • Developing activities around what UMAS students were good at it (for example, story writing, diary writing and art.) • Learning basic information about their background, such as their city and country of origin, the languages they speak, their skills and interests, their hobbies and their hopes • Opportunity to document positive memories around home life and culture, • Identifying and highlighting and promoting the skills, talents and passions of UMAS students • Supporting UMAS students to link their passions with potential educational and / or employment pathways. • Activities focused on re-assuring their sense of self (e.g., Map Strengths)
Cultivating Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mapping their own community • Small group problem solving activities • Role-plays • Team-based learning games • Games that encouraged play and laughter, including volleyball, soccer and Australian Rules Football and tug-o-war • Facilitating classroom activities geared towards the breaking-down of cultural barriers, for example, activities that celebrated their cultural diversity. • Activities focused on building relationships in the community.