

Research report

Flexible models for learning English are needed for refugee mothers

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The importance of English language acquisition for resettlement of refugees is well established, particularly as a pathway to education, employment, health and social connections. A qualitative study was conducted in 2011 in Melbourne, Australia utilising focus groups with 87 refugee background women from Karen, Iraqi, Assyrian Chaldean, Lebanese, South Sudanese and Bhutanese refugee

backgrounds. Focus groups and interviews were also conducted with 18 service providers and five bicultural and community workers. Several barriers were identified that prevented refugee mothers from learning English; however, some innovative and flexible models appear promising. The development, implementation and evaluation of innovative models and settings for refugee background women with young children to learn English in a culturally appropriate way are essential.

Importance of English for refugee settlement

Australia receives approximately 13,750 refugees each year (DIAC 2011). The process of refugee resettlement is complex, and it has been widely documented that gaining host-country language proficiency is critical for integration (Colic-Pesker & Walker 2003; Taylor 2004). Research shows that groups most at risk of exclusion, such as women, the elderly and those with limited previous education, are those least likely to learn English (Beiser 2009). Language skills are vital for participating in education and employment, and accessing services, which in turn, affect opportunities to develop social connections (Ager & Strang 2008).

As part of a suite of settlement services, new migrants to Australia with less than 'functional' English are eligible for 510 hours of free English language classes (DIAC 2011). Refugees are less likely than other migrants to have family and friends already in Australia, and so they rely on English classes and other settlement services as sources of information (AMES 2011). Failure to access English classes, therefore, heightens the risk of social isolation. An Australian study found low English proficiency was a significant predictor of post-partum depression for migrant mothers. Women in this category more commonly reported loneliness and isolation and a need for more support (Bandyopadhyay, Small, Watson & Brown 2010).

A Canadian longitudinal study found associations between limited English fluency and depression and unemployment among refugee women ten years after arrival (Beiser 2009). Conversely, English language proficiency has been found to promote wellbeing and self-esteem (Sun Hee Ok, Ehrich & Ficorilli 2012).

This study

The authors conducted a qualitative study exploring experiences of utilisation of the state-wide maternal and child health services by refugee background people in Melbourne, Australia. This report presents additional unsolicited findings concerning barriers for women's participation in English language courses that emerged during the study.

Focus groups were conducted with 87 mothers from diverse backgrounds including: Karen, Iraqi, Assyrian Chaldean, Lebanese, South Sudanese and Bhutanese. Participants had lived in Australia for an average of 4.7 years. Service providers, including nurses, bicultural workers and other community workers, also participated. The full methods and results of this study are published elsewhere (Riggs et al. under review).

Results

Barriers for learning English

Participants reported wanting to learn English, but found attendance at classes impossible. For many this was due to child-rearing responsibilities and concerns that available childcare options were culturally inappropriate. Processes for accessing part-time study options are complex and women expressed concern that part-time, rather than full-time, study may affect their welfare payments.

Service providers reported that most refugee families prioritised attendance at English classes for the male, as head of the household,

to increase employment opportunities. Several also stated that some women were discouraged from attending mixed-gender classes by their husbands or other family members who considered them inappropriate. As one nurse commented:

It's pretty sad; it just doesn't seem to be considered important that the woman knows how to speak English too, and to me that's a huge power imbalance there, so her husband learns to speak English and she doesn't know how to say anything (Refugee Health Nurse).

Those mothers who accessed English classes found the allocated 510 hours insufficient, as this was the first experience for many of classroom-based learning. Some received home tutoring, but usually only one hour per week, which is not enough to learn a new language.

Impact of limited English

Our study confirmed previous findings that limited English proficiency leaves mothers at risk of isolation and marginalisation. As their children rapidly become proficient in English, communication issues and family dysfunction can arise. Most mothers felt their families would benefit if they learnt English, as they could be independent and not reliant on others to translate and interpret for them. English language acquisition would also increase mothers' confidence in accessing mainstream services:

...some people they are afraid. They don't know English and how they go on the [answering] machine. For me, it took me three days to make an appointment myself, I got the card, the number and I got the phone but I can't...because it scares me (South Sudanese mother).

All mothers giving birth in Victoria are invited to attend a mothers' group, which aims to provide peer support for new mothers living close to each other. For refugee mothers, lack of English limits this opportunity, as they reported being too scared to attend.

Despite giving up opportunities to learn English in favour of looking after their children, at times this decision compromised their parenting. As some women explained, they were unable to communicate with their children's kindergarten and school teachers.

Dependence on public transport was particularly challenging for mothers who had to take children to kindergarten and school before going to English classes. Many refugees settle in new areas of housing development, where public transport is either inaccessible or too difficult to negotiate with several young children, particularly when services are infrequent.

The Bhutanese and South Sudanese mothers, in particular, identified computer and internet access and skills as problematic—as seeking employment, obtaining qualifications and driving licences all require computer skills and English language proficiency.

Innovative models for learning English

Some innovative *ad hoc* models were identified which offered opportunities for women to learn English by incorporating language learning into local programs, including cooking classes, culturally-specific and multicultural playgroups, and bilingual story-time. Several service providers reported that opportunities for conversational English in these programs allowed women to improve everyday language skills such as reading food packages and reading timetables for public transport. Many service providers and several women reported that gaining confidence in speaking English in these contexts was a key factor in assisting them to become self-sufficient. A program in Queensland was trialled in culturally appropriate settings and involved workshop-style learning based on real-life literacy needs and adopted a socio-cultural approach to English language learning (Hewagodage and O'Neill 2010).

Conclusion

Enhancing inclusion for refugee background women is a matter of human rights and is a significant community concern with lifelong and intergenerational impacts. Language proficiency is an important means of achieving inclusion. However, this study identified a range of barriers particular to mothers in accessing English language classes. It also confirmed the existing evidence that lack of English compromises study and work opportunities, impedes access to a range of health and social services, and increases social isolation. Flexible models that incorporate English learning into real-world contexts demonstrate promise. Rigorous evaluation of these models is critical for identifying successful strategies for supporting refugee settlement.

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