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Addressing the educational challenges faced by African refugee background students: Perceptions of West Australian stakeholders

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Australian schools have a long history of providing education to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including new arrivals who are still in the process of acquiring English as an additional language. Nonetheless, the cohort of refugee children and youth coming from Africa's troubled regions in the last few years poses additional challenges for English as a second language (ESL) and mainstream teachers. This paper draws on data from a qualitative research project undertaken in Western Australia to explore the perceptions of African refugee background students, their parents/caregivers, teachers, and others involved in their education and support. The findings are described with respect to the perceived overarching challenges faced by students and teachers and as well as the main literacy issues which, in turn, affect student access to the wider curriculum. Possible strategies to address the problems identified by participants and literacy professionals are proposed.

Keywords: *African refugees; ESL; new arrivals; perceptions*

Introduction

This paper draws on data collected in a larger qualitative study (Haig & Oliver, 2007b), commissioned by the Westralian Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, undertaken

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over the course of eighteen months. It sought to investigate the perceptions of African refugee background (ARB) students, their parents/caregivers, teachers, and others involved in their education and support. The overall aim of the study was to gain a better understanding of how teachers and other support staff might assist these students to integrate more effectively into Western Australian schools, communities, and eventually the workforce.

A holistic approach was taken to identify educational, emotional, physical, social, and familial needs. While all these dimensions are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the plight of ARB students and cannot be overlooked, this paper focuses on the educational needs identified by stakeholders. It examines the overarching educational challenges faced by these students and their teachers in the context of the classroom culture and practices in Western Australia (WA). It explores teacher perceptions of the main literacy issues and how these can impact on students' abilities to access the wider curriculum. The strategies proposed by participants and literacy professionals are presented with respect to the educational issues identified in the study.

Background

The last decade has seen a marked increase in the number of humanitarian visas granted to African refugees seeking protection under Australia's Offshore Resettlement Program (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008a). The annual intake peaked between 2003 and 2005 when over 70% of refugees were African. Nonetheless, the proportion of arrivals has remained relatively high (30.5%), with six African nations (Sudan, Liberia, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Congo, and Eritrea) among the ten top countries of origin for new arrivals with more on the way (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008a).

Most African refugee children come to Australia with their relatively large nuclear or extended families, though many families are not intact. These tend to be headed by single parents, usually women with limited or no literacy skills in English or in their own language; and some older youths arrive unaccompanied. Many children present with a range of emotional, social, health, and familial issues which impact upon their learning at school and at home. (For a detailed analysis and discussion of these matters, see the original study by Haig & Oliver, 2007b.) A large proportion of

arrivals have also experienced limited, disrupted, or no prior schooling (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). Consequently, most ARB children and youth enter Australian classrooms with minimal English and no literacy skills in their first language, creating enormous challenges for ESL and mainstream teachers.

Although ARB students are distinctive from earlier refugee groups, they are similar to previous cohorts in that many have endured significant hardship and been traumatised by the violence, torture, rape, the fragmentation of families, community breakdown, and malnutrition associated with civilian victims of civil war (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2005). In contrast to the young refugees fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Bosnia, most of whom had had some previous schooling and were literate in their first language, most ARB students come from cultures with strong oral rather than literate traditions (Sangster, 2002). Moreover, having spent years and sometimes decades in refugee camps, the lack of formal education spans multiple generations (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). In addition, African refugees come from wide ranging national, cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds, making it difficult to obtain assistance from interpreters and those already settled in the community (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Muir, 2004).

Over the last decade WA, like other states and territories, has accepted large numbers of refugees from various troubled African regions, including Sudan (n=3007), Liberia (n=544), Sierra Leone (n=478), the Democratic Republic of Congo (n=308), and Burundi (n=220) (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008b). Unfortunately, separate statistics on the number of ARB students in the system were not available from the WA Department of Education and Training. Compared to other jurisdictions, however, WA supports ARB students to remain in Intensive English Centres (IECs) for up to two years before entering mainstream education. Yet, even in the best conditions, achieving oral proficiency in another language takes at least three to five years, and academic English proficiency a minimum of four to seven years (Cummins, 1999).

Accommodating the needs of ARB students is particularly challenging as they adjust to the cultural and behavioural expectations of the school. The psychological and emotional scarring of past experiences manifests in various ways, with some withdrawing and others displaying assertive or aggressive

behaviours (Ali & Jones, 2000; Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005; Muir, 2004). Furthermore, in addition to developing competencies in English language, literacy, and numeracy, many students need to acquire basic organisational and time management skills as well as Western cultural concepts embedded in the curriculum (Ali & Jones, 2000; Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005).

Developing these skills takes time and is often challenging because of their home life situation. Many ARB students have difficulty finding time for homework because of household chores (Earnest, Housen, & Gillieatt, 2007) and the everyday problems associated with poverty, such as inadequate housing, transportation, and poor health (Ali & Jones, 2000). As their English skills overtake those of their caregivers, they frequently assume the adult responsibilities of dealing with banks, utility companies, health clinics, and other service agencies (McBrien, 2005). Furthermore, their enthusiasm for adapting to Australian culture is diminished by their experience of, and inability to, negotiate aggression and racism within the school and community (Ali & Jones, 2000).

One previous study investigated the perceptions of ARB adolescents in the WA setting (Earnest, Housen, & Gillieatt, 2007). Although the importance of schooling in creating social support was noted, the focus was on psychosocial wellbeing. The views of ARB students have also been examined by Coventry, Guerra, McKenzie, and Pinkey (2002), as have those of teachers (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). To our knowledge, however, none has considered the perceptions of these or other stakeholders in WA or elsewhere. Thus, the present study adopted a broad approach investigating the educational needs of these students and strategies to assist them in their learning as they embark on their new lives in WA schools and communities.

Methodology

The study involved 117 participants associated with eight different primary and secondary schools as well as other government and non-government support agencies, as shown in Table 1.

Interview schedules were piloted and refined. Data were collected from caregivers and students in focus group interviews, using open-ended questions to elicit their views about language and educational needs, expectations, (student) aspirations, and issues of concern. Interpreters assisted in caregiver focus groups.

Table 1. Study participants.

STAKEHOLDERS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Parents/caregivers	11
School Deputy Principals (IECS)	3 primary school; 2 high school
ESL teachers (IECs)	13 primary school; 14 high school
Mainstream teachers	3 primary school
Students	16 high school
Ethnic education assistants	7 primary school; 1 high school
Youth worker	1 primary school
ESL resource centre staff	2
Officers from Mirrabooka Migrant Resource Centre	2
Officers from an NGO	2
Teachers – ESL and mainstream (Questionnaire respondents)	40
Total	117

ESL and mainstream teachers as well as IEC deputy principals engaged in focus group and individual interviews. Questionnaires were used to collect additional data from IEC teachers, mainstream teachers in schools with significant numbers of ARB students, and the ESL "cell" teachers who look after the needs of ESL students in a cluster of schools, providing ESL support for students in mainstream classes.

A survey of teaching and learning resources valued by teachers facilitated the compilation of a resource list (available in original report by Haig & Oliver, 2007b). In addition, a workshop for 40 literacy professionals (Haig & Oliver, 2007a) served to supplement the list of possible strategies offered by the study's participants.

Discourse analytic approaches were used to identify recurring themes emerging in the focus group and individual interview data (Miller & Glassner, 2004).

Findings

This section discusses the overarching educational issues relating to the challenges faced by ARB students as they adjust to

schooling in WA. Matters pertaining to literacy development and accessing the wider curriculum are followed by a summary of the main issues identified and potential solutions. Italicised text in the data represents both the spoken and written voices of the participants. In some data samples, teachers describe the abilities of some ARB students using language which implies a "deficit" perspective (Cummins, 2003), a view not supported by the authors.

Overarching educational challenges

Most adolescent student participants expressed a commitment to their education and had very high expectations for what they could achieve. Many aimed to work in the service professions, hoping to complete university degrees so that they could return to their home countries and serve as doctors, lawyers, and teachers. The teachers, however, noted considerable variability across the grouping with regard to academic achievement. They saw much of this dependent on the amount of prior schooling, trauma experienced, exposure to English, literacy levels in their families, home situation, and the degree of cultural, social, and educational difference between the student's home country and Australia.

Teachers, caregivers, and students themselves expressed the view that most ARB students have very high educational (and other) needs in relation to developing their academic, social, and cultural understandings. The consensus among teachers was that ARB students attend IECs for longer than previous cohorts. They expressed concern that "*there are so many gaps*" and that many of these students are simply "*not ready*" for the demands of schooling in Australia. One teacher observed that some students may not be getting the assistance they need in an attempt to save face. She said that they "*understand that they are behind and they know it and you can see that they are trying to hide it.*" While some ARB students may try to conceal their need for assistance in the classroom, the student participants openly acknowledged a desire for more help. One asserted that the work was "*very hard*," with another adding that "*teachers don't understand how long work takes us*" and that there is rarely enough time to complete tasks.

While most ARB parents/caregivers are aware of the educational challenges faced by their children, those who had experiences of other education systems perceived the issue quite differently. For example, one caregiver pointed out that "*school is*

very different in Australia to Africa." She observed that in Australian schools, students are placed

> in year by age not ability – very different – children have no skills but are in Year 8. In Africa you go in the class where you know the work you have to do. When children who can't read and write and have no school before Australia, have one year maybe a bit more in IEC, and then go to high school, they need a special program to get ready for high school. Some are in year 10, but they struggle and do bad behaviour and then they get in trouble with the law. They are in the wrong year level – no real age.

This caregiver's comment suggests that, in her view, the problem lies with the Australian education system, which promotes students according to age rather than competence.

A number of other parents/caregivers also raised behavioural issues, mostly expressing frustration at the apparent lack of discipline in WA schools and the need for stronger measures. Caregivers said they need to be informed about their children misbehaving, so they can "*make them listen, not like a teacher.*" One caregiver group found the notions of detention and suspension a source of merriment, with one commenting that when children have been naughty, "*they stay at home – so what?*" Another asserted that "*our children grow up without the soft skin of Australians and are used to caning.*" They were confused, furthermore, about the apparent "contradictory" stance of some teachers: "*The teachers tell us what our children have done wrong, but if we deal with it, the teachers say, 'It's all right. Don't do that'.* "

Indeed, some teachers felt apprehensive about the punishment that students might endure at home. One teacher described how she was reluctant to discipline a student when she noticed the girl's reaction. She explained, "*The student is carrying an enormous load; mum has mental health problems. I noticed the way I was speaking to her* [the student]. *I thought, hmm, she just needs some space today. There's extreme dysfunction in their setups.*" On the whole, teachers agreed with one ethnic education assistant who pointed out that students "*need time to adjust*" and learn the rules, but that parents/caregivers also "*need to be taught about discipline*" strategies for the home context.

Not all ARB students respond to the educational (and other) challenges by behaving badly, but it contributes to other evidence that, for many ARB students, two years in the IEC is insufficient to

prepare them for mainstream schooling. Some WA schools have responded by instituting programs to ease the transition between IECs and mainstream classrooms. However, some teachers maintained that the current approach is inadequate. One secondary level IEC teacher noted that students just "*weren't ready for the transition program, so the new program is very literal and concrete. It would be nice to be able try to get them to be more non-literal but that takes years to learn.*" The need to give ARB students more time to learn and adjust was a recurring theme with regard to meeting the challenges of Australian schooling as well as developing the literacy skills required to access the wider curriculum in mainstream education.

The challenges of developing oral and written literacy skills

As reported elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Sangster, 2002), teachers in the present study found a high proportion of ARB students have high levels of need with regard to developing literacy skills. In the WA school systems, students are classified as having "*limited schooling*" if they enter schools with zero to four years of formal schooling, continuous, or interrupted. As noted elsewhere (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005), WA teachers reported that some children are the second or third generation in their families with no schooling so that they receive little or no support at home. Moreover, a number of parents/caregivers with educational experience in Africa feel that education is the business of experts in schools. As parents, they do not believe they have the skills to teach their children about academic matters.

For students with non-literate backgrounds, participant teachers underscored the need to concentrate on oral language development, at least initially. Yet while students appear to achieve oral proficiency quickly, teachers cautioned that this fluency is often superficial. In the written survey, a secondary teacher described how justice was compromised by one student's limited vocabulary:

> Most African students have attained appropriate fluency in English in 1-2 years, but only basic vocabulary is properly understood. A 16 year old Sudanese boy had been involved in a fight during a football match on a Sunday (not a school function) following racial taunts by the opposition. A policeman asked him, "Did you intentionally hit the boy?" Answer, "Yes." A teacher (in loco parentis) asked him what "intentionally" meant. He did not know.

Another teacher pointed out that oral fluency does not transfer easily to writing, arguing that while ARB students may appear "*orally, reasonably adept when exiting IEC centres; written,* [they are] *very dependent on previous learning experience. Generally, however, grammatical structures and ability to write even basic level work, they struggle even after three years.*" Another respondent observed that for children from strong oral cultures whose first language is not written, it "*takes time to see reading and writing as a form of communication.*"

Primary teachers working with young ARB children noted the challenges of teaching writing. One questionnaire respondent described the extent of her students' literacy development needs as: "*HUGE! A basic class is needed especially for these students… their skills are very limited, e.g., cutting and pasting, holding a pencil, sitting in chairs.*" Others concurred, relating how many children are unaccustomed to sitting and concentrating for requisite time periods and need to develop the fine motor skills required for the activities that support written literacy development. Another teacher claimed that both younger and older students "*need to develop basic learning skills required to cope in a classroom (social skills, organisational skills, pre-reading and pre-writing skills).*"

A secondary teacher observed evidence of a problem long recognised in the literature (e.g., Cummins, 1980): that ARB students can "*acquire BICS* [basic interpersonal communication skills] *quite quickly. Some arrive with English.* [But they] *often reach a plateau in* [the] *IEC for a while,* [and] *need years to use CALP* [cognitive and academic language proficiency] *effectively.*" The consequence of students' two year limit in IECs is that their oral and literacy development becomes the responsibility of mainstream teachers with only intermittent support of ESL cell teachers.

Teachers expressed concern that ARB students' low literacy levels will impede their access to the broader curriculum of mainstream education: "*If they can't read well, they'll struggle in all areas.*" One teacher asserted that to help students expand their language and literacy skills in different curriculum areas, "*every teacher*" must assume the role of "*a literacy teacher.*" However, some mainstream teachers reported feeling unprepared for this challenge. In particular, upper primary and secondary teachers may be unfamiliar with the pedagogy required to help students develop basic literacy skills. One resourceful secondary teacher described her approach and her frustration as follows:

> I use a top down, bottom up approach. I set tasks that are meaningful to the students such as writing applications for

> McDonalds or KFC and then teach them the skills they need. But sometimes they struggle with the basic skills – I need primary training – and I find knowing how to help them hard. I have some help from my net searches. But I need to know more about how you learn to read and write.

It is clear that in the past, teachers in these levels have not had to attend to the knowledge, skills, and understandings required for the early stages of literacy development. Consequently, pedagogies associated with the development of the reading and writing processes, such as building students' graphophonic, syntactic and semantic knowledge, must become part of their repertoire.

One teacher, however, expressed the view that ARB students are "*no weaker than other students.*" She claimed that ARB students "*fit in well with the SAER* [students at educational risk] *kids in each class.*" This practice suggests that ARB students may be categorised as SAER despite demonstrating aptitude in other areas, for example, maths, a problem observed elsewhere (Allen, 2002). Another consequence of stereotyping students as SAER is that they may be denied access to supplementary assistance in ESL or help in developing the basic study skills required to succeed in Australian schools.

Issues and possible strategies

The educational needs and issues of ARB students, highlighted in the discussion above, are summarised in Tables 2-4 below. The potential strategies offered by the study's participants follow solid dot points (•); those provided by literacy professionals from the workshop are preceded by asterisk-shaped points (*). It should be noted that these "solutions" are necessarily general and need to be adapted to the specific needs and context of students.

Table 2. Overarching educational issues.

NEEDS/ISSUES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
Raising performance levels	• Become familiar with students' backgrounds • Access ESL resource centres; • Attend existing (or request) professional development seminars

	• Develop programs for non-literate students • Develop social and cultural support programs for students and families * Attend to social and cultural aspects of all learning * Provide community-based cultural and social experiences "taken for granted" by other children
Students concealing lack knowledge	• Improve communication with students • Adapt curriculum to provide scaffolding and of opportunities for success • Recognise strengths and achievements rather than weaknesses * Develop appropriate curriculum * Make the hidden explicit * Implement SLA sensitive assessments * Facilitate cognitively appropriate learning strategies * Use materials with adjusted language and appropriate scaffolding
Caregivers' perceptions of Australia's system as needed.	• Create caregiver forums (learning groups or one-to-one meetings) to explicate relevant aspects of school system, such as year placement and advancement
Caregivers' perceptions of discipline	• Organise "parenting" classes • Counselling services with school psychologist • Liaise with ethnic education assistants and school youth workers • Work with students to develop self-discipline * Adopt a few but consistently applied rules * Adjust curriculum to reduce stress and promote success * Provide additional support in transition phases (entry to school or an IEC, into the mainstream, from pre-primary to primary, and from primary to secondary)

Table 3. Literacy issues.

ISSUES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
Students with non-literate backgrounds	• Initial focus on oral language development • Develop and use materials relevant to students' lives • Implement programs to enable students to see literacy as relevant and necessary to their present and future lives • Assign purposeful tasks • Exploit visual aids • Explicitly teach print reading and writing and conventions • Explain context, build social and cultural knowledge
Superficial oral fluency	• Continuous oral language development • Work to expand vocabulary
Limited or no literacy support at home	• Develop support programs (learning events or one-to-one meetings with interpreters) • Address different cultural perspectives on education and the important role of caregivers in Australian contexts (explain that education is not just the business of experts at school) • Provide practical advice on how caregivers can promote literacy development at home * Share strategies and materials that work with other teachers
Time required for literacy development	• Recognition of limited schooling • Additional time in IEC • Additional ESL specialist assistance in mainstream schools (cell programs, extension of time) * Differentiated staffing * Greater use of bilingual aides

Table 4. Mainstream education.

NEEDS/ISSUES	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
Transitional programs (between IECs and mainstream)	• Develop and expand transitional programs • Cultivate (cognitively appropriate) "learning to learn" strategies, (e.g., organisational skills) • Provide scaffolding for shift from literal/concrete to conceptual thinking
Improving literacy across the curriculum	• "Every teacher is a literacy teacher" • Attention to language needs in all areas of the curriculum • Explicit teaching of language and assumed cultural knowledge • Use "rich tasks" to meet real life needs • Allow students more time with and provide assistance * Use materials and strategies that support low literacy learners to access a challenging curriculum that takes account of their cognitive development and is age appropriate
Placement of ARB students with SAER groups	• Provision of differentiated curriculum • Obtain assistance of ESL specialist teacher * Fluid groupings that facilitate peer tutoring * Specialist programs for ESL needs (which are seen as different to literacy needs)

Conclusion and recommendations

ARB students present distinctive challenges for ESL and mainstream teachers as well as other support personnel. To ensure that teachers interact with ARB students and their families in an effective and culturally sensitive manner, they need to receive practical support and professional development. Such programs would increase awareness of the needs, circumstances, and cultural backgrounds of these students and facilitate a better understanding of the principle of "inclusivity."

Additional professional training is needed to help both ESL and mainstream teachers to extend their pedagogical skills,

particularly in regard to developing appropriate methodologies and assessment procedures for ARB students. Moreover, teachers need to petition their schools and district officers so that they may receive relevant professional development programs to assist them in meeting the challenges of working with ARB students. Perhaps most importantly, ARB students need time to adjust, time to be socialised into new ways of being, time to learn English, and time and support to develop the skills that most Australians take for granted.

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