



Working with African Refugee Students

www.ansn.edu.au

Introduction - 2008

Since 2000, Australia accepts refugees from Africa in accordance with the priorities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). By 2005-06, people from Africa comprised 56% of the 12,758 refugees accepted into Australia, in that year. The majority of these African refugees were from Sudan.

Refugees do not leave their homes by choice; they have been forced to do so by war and/or a well-founded fear of persecution. Refugees from Africa, and from Sudan in particular, have usually had the experience of seeing a family member murdered or attacked. They have often suffered attack themselves. They have usually left their homes hastily without saying goodbye to family members and their community; members of their family may be missing or dead and they have left behind all but a few belongings.

They may have spent long periods of time fleeing their country and years in refugee camps that do not even provide basic safety and adequate food. Although, some children may be fortunate to have had the opportunity for intermittent schooling in the refugee camps, this is not a frequent and common experience.

All refugees have suffered and may still suffer from the effects various forms of trauma, dislocation and loss that they have experienced. They are people who invariably show a remarkable capacity for survival and have demonstrated great resilience and strength by the time they reach Australia.

This is the background of the African students who are now in schools in Australia. Although they have survival skills that are hard for the average Australian to comprehend, they do not have the personal or educational profiles that allow them to fit readily into the Australian school context. Hence, it is clear that teachers and schools will need to find ways to capitalise and build on the strengths of these students and to assist them to build new (and sometimes unfamiliar) skills if they are to settle successfully in Australia.

Teaching to make a difference:
Strategies for Working with the African
Refugee Students in Transition.

University of
Western Sydney
Bringing knowledge to life



Preview sample only. Full snapshot available for purchase

ISBN No. 978-0-9805366-0-7

Teaching to make a difference - Project

Teaching to make a difference is an action research project that grew out of the Sudanese Learning and Literacy Alliance (SLLA) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and funded in part by the UWS Office of Research Services and in part by the UWS Regional Council.

There has been an influx of school-aged African refugees into Greater Western Sydney (GWS) over the last five years. Meeting the particular social and educational needs of this group is a challenge for the teachers and the schools. For the students, the demands and expectations of the Australian education system are new and foreign.

School-age refugees begin their schooling in Australia in Intensive English Centres (IEC) to develop their English language skills before being integrated into mainstream schooling. Both the IECs and the schools find it challenging to meet the needs of these students.

The students come from highly developed oral cultures and they may be fluent in two or more languages. However they may not have literacy or numeracy skills. They may not have the pre-literacy skills that we tend to take for granted of holding a pen or understanding the use of a book. They can also be suffering from trauma, dislocation and loss.

Objectives

The objectives of the Teaching to make a difference project are to:

- Examine the current practices and policies employed by schools and teachers in selected schools in GWS to support refugee students
- Examine teachers' understanding of African students' competencies, learning styles and cultural background
- Identify and develop a compilation of practices to optimise the academic and social development of refugee students, through writing-based research circles with teachers.

In carrying out this project, UWS formed research partnerships with the NSW Department of Education and Training, the Catholic Education Office, and the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN). The schools that participated in the project have chosen to remain anonymous.

Research circles

Three teachers in the research circles have written up Snapshots based on their experience working with African refugee students. They offer their own experience, reflections and strategies for the support of other teachers working with similar students.

Wider Research

ANSN is interested in broadening out the opportunity for teachers to share their experiences of teaching African refugee students by submitting their own Snapshots.

You may have your own story that you are really keen to tell and are ready to write. All Snapshots should be sent to: <http://www.ansn.edu.au/submit-snapshot> It's great to hear success stories but an exploration of what went wrong can also teach us a lot.

If you are working with African refugee students and would like to do some reading and reflecting before you write, you may find the guide questions and following resources useful.

¹ Australian Immigration Fact Sheet 60, Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program, Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee.htm

Guide Questions

1. What has your experience in the classroom taught you about African refugee students – their vulnerability, their resilience and how their past experience impacts on their learning?
2. Have you made connections with the students' communities, which have assisted you to work with the students more effectively? What did you do?
3. At the University of Western Sydney, a focus group from the Sudanese community said that culturally Sudanese students find it humiliating to ask questions. Is this your experience? If it is, what strategies do you use to replace questions?
4. The same focus group said that some students just sit in mainstream classes, not participating and not learning. Have you had this experience? What have you done about it?
5. How have you kept parents (who may not be literate) informed about their children's progress, schooling choices, requirements of the schooling system and career choices? Do parents come to your school? If not how have you encouraged their involvement?
6. 'The practice of working through a trauma may not be successful for people whose culture places a high value on stoicism and active forgetting.'² Does this statement relate to your experience of working with African refugee students and their communities?
7. Tell a story to illustrate the learning skills of these young people who have survived the refugee experience.
8. How do you build on the resilience and strength of these powerful survivors when they are living in a place like Australia that requires them to learn a new range of skills?
9. A Sudanese community support worker said 'Teenagers need to understand their family obligations to household income and not just think that Youth Allowance is their money alone'. Different ideas about obligation to family in Australia and the culture from which the student originally comes can cause conflict that has an impact on a student's life and learning. Can you tell a story that illustrates such a conflict and perhaps a resolution?

Resources

African Australian Online Resource, www.africanOz.com.au

Burgoyne, U. & Hull, O. 2007, Classroom management strategies to address the needs of Sudanese refugee learners, Support document: methodology and literature review, NCVET, Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training,

<http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr5106s2.pdf>, (Burgoyne and Hull's research is with adult learners)

Burgoyne, U. & Hull, O. 2007, Key messages - Classroom management strategies to address the needs of Sudanese refugee learners, NCVET, Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr5106k.htm>

Burgoyne, U. & Hull, O. 2007, Teaching learners from highly oral cultural backgrounds: Good practice guide, NCVET, Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1804.html>

Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Government, <http://www.immi.gov.au/index.htm>

SAIL, Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning Program, <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~sail/>

SORA, Sudanese Online Research Association, <http://sora.akm.net.au/research.php>

STARRTS, New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors www.startts.org.au

Success Stories - Kicking Goals from Sudan to Launceston, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Government, http://www.immi.gov.au/media/success_stories/Juma-Abuyi.htm

Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. – Schools Page, <http://www.foundationhouse.com.au/schools.php>

² Burgoyne, U. & Hull, O. 2007, *Recent Research on the Refugee Experience*, NCVET, Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr5106s2.pdf>

Take the time to read, to talk to other teachers and the community, to find out about the experiences that your students may have been through. Be sensitive to their histories.