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**LEARNING TO BE LITERATE:  
ISSUES OF PEDAGOGY FOR RECENTLY ARRIVED REFUGEE  
YOUTH IN AUSTRALIA**

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*This paper focuses on issues of access to productive literacy learning as part of socially just schooling for recently arrived refugee youth within Australia. It argues that a sole reliance on traditional ESL pedagogy is failing this vulnerable group of students, who differ significantly from past refugees who have settled in Australia. Many have been 'placeless' for some time, are likely to have received at best an interrupted education before arriving in Australia, and may have experienced significant trauma (Christie & Sidhu, 2006; Cottone, 2004; Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). Australian Government policy has resulted in specialized settlement, leaving particular schools dealing with a large influx of refugee students who may be attending school for the first time (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2004; Sidhu & Christie, 2002). While this has implications generally, it has particular consequences for secondary school students attempting to learn English literacy in short periods of time, without basic foundations in either English or print-based literacy in any first language (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, 2006). Many of these students leave schools without the most basic early literacy practices, having endured several years of pedagogy pitched well beyond their needs. This paper suggests that schools must take up three key roles: to educate, to provide a site for the development of civic responsibility, and to act as a site for welfare with responsibility.*

*As a system, our department needs to work out what can we do for 17-18 year olds that are coming into our school system in year 10 without more than 1-2 years of education. I don't think there is a policy about what to do. – (T2-ESL teacher)*

## Introduction

To achieve a high quality and high equity system for all students – and more specifically for this paper for those students who have recently arrived in a new context after some process of forced migration – there is a need to balance the provision of basic literacy and language, discipline content, and cultural content along with a space where reciprocal learning of the dominant and marginalized cultures is accessible to all students. It also requires a socially just approach that attends to the welfare of students. Bartolome (1994) discusses the humanist approach to ensuring systems attend to the needs of culturally diverse students. Such a perspective works to make visible the culture, history, and perspectives of all students within the everyday lived experiences and the institutional practices of ‘getting an education.’ In this paper I will explore the possibilities of providing a responsive education for secondary students who have recently arrived in Australia as refugee young people by mapping key roles for schools to take in the lives of these students.

While making estimates of the number of refugee people worldwide is difficult, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that the number approximates 20 million, with an additional 12 million people categorized as ‘stateless’ (UNHCR, 2008). There is little doubt from the large volume of quantitative and qualitative data collected through aid and humanitarian agencies and government bodies that “large numbers of students with interrupted schooling” and low levels of competency in the local language of the new home state “represent both a quantitative and qualitative shift in the kinds of students” faced by teachers in classrooms (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005, p. 20). In Australia, there is an increasingly diverse pedagogic experience in the backgrounds of this group of students as a result of a dramatic demographic shift in the refugees arriving. It is vital to remember that refugee students and those seeking asylum are a heterogeneous group, with different education backgrounds and experiences. As Christie and Sidhu (2004) suggest, “this makes generalization difficult and challenges us to work against stereotypes” (p. 35). While receiving asylum or refugee status in Australia has become more difficult in recent years, Australia remains as a country that per capita leads the way in terms of the numbers of refugees settled in comparison to other industrialized nations. However statistics collected by large agencies such as the UNHCR continue to demonstrate that the idea that industrialized nations are being left to cater to the needs of the greater proportion of refugees is a myth. On average 83-90% of refugees stay within their region of origin, often moving only to neighboring nation states (UNHCR, 2008, p. 7). In the 2007-8 year Australia granted more than 13,000 humanitarian visas, and it is expected this trend will continue in 2008-09 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).

The Australian schooling sector is organized around State boundaries, which means the specificities of placement and service provision for newly arrived refugee young people as students is dependent upon where they locate on arrival. Generally, newly arrived students receive six to twelve months of an intensive English language program, but in some systems this can be as long as two years. They are then generally integrated into mainstream school

education with varying levels of English Second Language (ESL) programming and adaptation.

The experience of schooling is a “stabilising feature in the unsettled lives of refugee students” (Matthews, 2008, p. 31), providing space for the building of relationships, developing cohesion with a new community (Dagenais, Beyon, & Mathis, 2008), and learning of language and literacy as well as discipline content. In a project undertaken with young Southern Sudanese refugees from three schools in the Western Sydney suburbs of Blacktown and Bankstown, Cassity and Gow (2005) suggest that schools can act as sites where refugee young people can come to terms with the trauma of forced migration, and make the transition to citizenship and belonging in multicultural Australia. However, the current complex visa system in Australia, along with a severely limited funding and resource base within mainstream schools, limits the possibilities of education for a large number of newly arrived refugee young people. Most notable the large numbers of recent refugees from Africa and the Middle East, many of whom have spent years in transit from their homelands before settling in Australia, or indeed who were born in refugee camps, have specific school-literacy learning needs and priorities that schools are struggling to service. Some of these students at least find themselves in the precarious situation of learning print literacy for the first time, in a language that is not their first and in which many have only basic levels of competence, in a school system that is foreign or perhaps the first school system that they have encountered, and with restriction on their engagement with schools brought about by their temporary visa status and indeed often their age<sup>1</sup>. These students face enormous challenges in learning content across the school subjects because of the complexity of terminology, vocabulary, and generic structure attributable to particular disciplines. This creates serious barriers for students in their learning across all school subjects (Miller, 2007). In addition the inability of schools to provide for this group effectively is problematic because schools are implicated in providing spaces to take up the role of citizens within Australia (Cassity & Gow, 2005). For this group of students, who are soon to lose their status as ‘student,’ access to opportunities to take up the promise of schools as a place to access social capital is crucial.

### **Changing Context of Education of Refugee Young People in Australia**

While demographics and legal status will only ever tell a partial story of the contextual factors that influence the lived experiences of refugees, they are an important beginning to understanding the current Australian context. As such, in the section that follows I give some detail of this context. Australia was an early signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention (1951) and has a history of accepting and resettling refugees from many regions

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<sup>1</sup> Students in Australia are able to attend high school until the end of the school year in which they are 18 years old. This has implications for young refugee people who arrive in Australia in their late adolescent years as the period that they are able to access a school education may be short or indeed non-existent. Teachers express concern at the pressure placed on students, teachers and schools to provide literacy instruction in what are sometimes very short timelines before mandated completion of school results because of the age of these young people.

of the world. In the past 50 years, approximately 600,000 refugees and people displaced from the original homelands have resettled in Australia. Keeping in mind Australia's small population, these numbers are significant. As a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention (1951) and its Protocol (1967), Australia also takes the UN definition of 'refugee' as someone who "has left their country of origin or habitual residence and owing to a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion is unable or unwilling to return" (United Nations, 1951/1967), p. 16). As within all nation states that are signatories to the Convention, refugees in Australia are dealt with under the *principle of non-refoulement*; that is, they have the right not to be returned to a place where they are, or fear they are, threatened by persecution.

Over the past decade of conservative government in Australia, the visa system has become more complicated, now with more than 80 visa types and subclasses that relate to newly arrived persons who have arrived in Australia as a result of trauma or displacement. The visa type attributed to individuals and families has implications for services and provisions made available, yet the determining factors of status attributed can be seen as complicated at best, and classist, racist, and discriminatory at worst. A brief explanation of the complicated system seems warranted but is not representative of the real complexity of the system. Australia's humanitarian program is divided into two categories – offshore and onshore. Within each of these categories there are permanent visas and temporary visas. Offshore permanent visas are either of the Refugee Category or the Special Humanitarian Category. The Refugee Category entitles holders to government assistance for travel and settlement. Those who are classified within the Special Humanitarian Programme (SHP) do not receive government assistance as they are sponsored by an Australian citizen, resident, or community group in Australia<sup>2</sup>. The onshore program exists for those who are already in Australia when applying for asylum. These people will have arrived in Australia on temporary visas or in an 'unauthorized' manner (Taybjee, 2005). The onshore protection component consists of the Temporary Protection Visa and the Permanent Protection Visa (The Refugee Council, 2008). However, unauthorized arrivals to Australia only receive temporary protection regardless of their ability to claim refugee status. To be 'unauthorized' usually means that you have arrived in Australia by boat. The move to Temporary Protection Visas for this group in the 1990s was one part of a suite of new initiatives aimed at 'stemming the tide of boat people' arriving from the north and worked alongside existing mandatory detention provisions and border repositioning to deter unauthorized migration. Temporary Visa status has considerable implications for new arrivals in terms of their basic citizenship and settlement entitlements.

In addition to officially recognized refugees or asylum seekers (those who have applied for refugee status but who have yet to have their status determined), there are many migrants and new arrivals within the Australian schooling system today who have experienced 'refugee-like' experiences in their history of transit to Australia. These people may have a visa which determines their status to be other than 'refugee' due to the way in which they entered Australia. However, the experience of such persons may well be refugee-like in terms of the

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<sup>2</sup> This sponsorship often places considerable financial burden on those who act as sponsors, who are often themselves former refugees.

reasons for their forced migration. The complexity of the visa system in Australia makes identification of this group of students in schools difficult, while estimating the numbers of students of this category accurately across a system level is virtually impossible.

In relation to the demographic characteristics of Australia's refugee community, there has been a shift over the past decade. Until relatively recently, refugees who arrived in Australia have tended to arrive from European countries (after the two World Wars) and from Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, former Yugoslavia, and South America during the periods after turmoil in these regions (Queensland Government Department of Communities, 2008). However, these long-standing trends have been altered by world events over recent years, and the composition of refugees arriving in Australia is now very different (Queensland Government, Department of Communities, 2008). Between the years of 2003 and 2008 more than 32,900 refugees arrived from Africa, settling in specialized patterns due to provision of housing and refugee support, despite conscious settlement policies by the Department of Immigration, Multiculturalism, and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) to disperse refugees across urban and regional districts in Australia. Of these 32,900 people, more than 5,000 settled in Qld, resulting in refugees who have arrived from Africa now making up 75% of all refugees in the state. The majority of these Qld settlers are Sudanese (3100 Sudanese have arrived since January 2000), but they also include peoples from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Rwanda and Uganda (Queensland Government, Department of Communities, 2008). In other parts of Australia, similar trends of increased numbers of refugees from Africa are also evident – Sudanese refugees currently constitute the largest single group of arrivals to Australia (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006). It is important to recognize that groups such as the 'Sudanese' are a heterogeneous group, fractured along religious, language, ethnic, and regional affiliations, some who have been part of mainstream society in Sudan and others such as those from the Southern Sudanese communities who have been minorities within their home country (Cassity & Gow, 2005, p. 52). In addition to this trend of increased numbers of refugees arriving from Africa, is a trend of refugees arriving from the Middle East. As an example in the South Western region of Sydney in NSW – a refugee new arrival hub for settlement and services – the top five countries of origin of new arrival refugee students in 2005 included Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, and Sierra Leone (Department of Education and Training, 2005).

Not only are more recent refugees arriving in Australia different in terms of their country of origin (or their parent's country of origin), but they are also different in terms of the complexity of the journey that they may have taken prior to arriving in Australia as a country of settlement. For many of these young people, this journey will have taken them over numerous borders and may have included temporary settlement in three or more countries (for a comprehensive discussion of what these journeys might entail see Gow, 2002, who discusses in detail, stories of persecution, escape, flight, life in refugee-camps, and eventual resettlement and reassemble of a community in the suburbs of Melbourne as narrated by members of a community of refugees originally from Oromo). While our impressions of this group of people should not be homogenised, many of these refugees have "distinctly different profiles from previous refugee communities. They bring with them enormous trauma from

civil conflicts, such as torture, rape, family separation, loss, and community breakdown” (Cassity & Gow, p. 52).

Such life histories have significant implications for resettlement across a range of issues including physical and mental health and well-being, financial support required for families, and in many cases for unaccompanied minors or young people who have the responsibility of younger siblings and relatives without the support of a parent or elder, language support and, perhaps most important, education. Research reported by Christie and Sidhu (2004) shows that “refugee and asylum-seeker students (in Australia) have highly differentiated backgrounds and educational experiences” (p. 35), with some students having lived their whole lives in camps during transit, while others may have had long periods of stability in education and living conditions in their home country before setting out for resettlement in Australia. The reality is though that many of the school age arrivals to Australia over the past decade have had no formal education, or severely interrupted education backgrounds (Olloff & Couch, 2005) due to extended time periods spent in settlement camps and the transient nature of their existence. This results in a need for service delivery that is qualitatively, and not just quantitatively different from, or additional to, traditional ESL instruction. These groups of young people interrupt how we can ‘know’ our secondary students, as assumptions about their schooling histories as continuous and founded on English print-based texts are difficult to sustain. As such it is necessary for schools and educators to find new ways to know, and to represent these students, as they work to respond productively.

### **Describing the Work to be Done: Perspectives from a Larger Study**

The impetus for this paper came from work on an Australian Research Council funded study on how state high schools, local communities, and state and federal policies met the educational needs of young refugee students. The ‘Schooling, Globalization and Refugees in Queensland’ project<sup>3</sup> involved three key sub studies, a school study, a policy analysis, and a study focused on young refugee people. The school study focused on the collection of interview data with classroom teachers, guidance and liaison officers, and administrators from five high schools in South East Queensland, each of which had substantial numbers of refugee students enrolled (Matthews, 2008), and it is this sub study that forms the basis of the thinking presented in this paper.

It is not the purpose of this paper to present an analysis of data collected within this study as such. This has been conducted elsewhere (see, e.g., Matthews, 2008), but my purpose is to present some preliminary thoughts on a socially just approach to solutions for refugee education in the current Australian context. The sections that follow are informed by the interview talk of one ESL teacher. It is vital in our current context of blame and deficit, to

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<sup>3</sup> This research was supported under Australian Research Council’s Discovery Projects funding scheme (project DP05597). The views expressed herein are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Australian Research Council or other members of the project team.

ensure that as educational researchers we do not fall into the habit of presenting stories that involve blaming others – teachers or students or their families – as a way to ensure a ‘good’ story. It seems easy to become complicit in the deficit explanations that circulate through policy, media and the common sense assumptions of service providers and the general public, but more difficult to present the case for solutions to endemic problems while remaining respectful to the key players and while presenting the issue, and the participants in the issue, as heterogeneous and complex. In my attempt to work in this way (Woods, 2008) I have chosen here to call on the words of one teacher to frame the setting out of the current field of refugee education. The interview was collected as part of the school study of the project described above.

What is notable about the approach taken by this teacher, and others like her, is the capacity to picture and constitute everyday school practice – learning and teaching – up front in the representations of refugee student experience, and in this way to manage to shift beyond deficit explanations of the students and their engagement with the school. Westernized schooling is predicated on an assumption that students within classroom spaces have been involved in continuous, print-based textual engagement with school subjects across the compulsory years of schooling. There is an underlying assumption within the construct of schooling, and those involved in its institution, that students within the secondary years are building their school experience on an accumulated history of relatively predictable experiences and curriculum content. This normalizes a certain type of ‘student’ and indeed a certain type of schooling, which in turn allows for what Foucault (1977) calls ‘binary divisions’ to be set up for all other categories of student. Opening our minds to this as an institutional process enables a consideration of the issues of education for refugee students to be conceptualized as other than – or at least not only – an individual pathology. It is indeed the assumption of a homogenized, uninterrupted print-based school experience that has enabled a deficit construction of those students who bring other histories to seem natural and apolitical.

The teacher’s responses reported throughout the following sections, were recorded during an interview, and after the teacher was asked to identify the main issues of importance concerning refugee youth that arose as part of her work with refugee students in the large public high school where she taught as an ELS teacher.

### **An Equitable Approach to Schooling**

With a continued drive toward competitiveness and accountability over the past several decades, schools within many Western public systems have worked within the constant constraints of balancing economic development and a focus on equity and socially just approaches to quality. Schools in Australia are no different. What socially just education might mean remains contested, but Nancy Fraser’s (1997) conceptual framework of recognitive and redistributive justice is helpful. Recognitive justice relates to ‘recognition’ and can be seen within moves toward including the various cultural backgrounds of an



increasingly diverse student population though the identification and recognition of cultural histories, skills, knowledge, and priorities (Luke, Weir, & Woods, 2008). In relation to refugee students, this involves recognizing the very different language competencies; the cultural, literacy, and relationship understandings; the education backgrounds and approaches to education of the heterogeneous group of young people; and their resultant education needs.

Redistributive justice relates to the “fair and equitable distribution of resources” – potential to wealth, access to services, engagement, and participation in public, economic, and culturally relevant life (Luke, Weir, & Woods, 2007). For refugee students in Australia this involves a realistic and equitable distribution of funds and resources to enable full participation in schooling and future potentials. It is also about policy shifts that firstly open new pathways relevant to the lived experiences of this group of students and secondly that will remove the urgency of educating young people in their late teens in what are often exceedingly short timelines after resettlement in Australia.

Keeping the two strands of cognitive and redistributive justice at the forefront of a discussion of what education should look like for refugee students is instructive as it insists that our approach becomes more than the tokenistic display of a ‘multicultural’ identity within schools. It insists on identification of diversity and cultural awareness along with mindful distribution of human, economic, and civic resources to achieve high quality and high equity systems for all students (Luke, Woods, & Weir, 2008). This embeds the challenges of refugee education within the challenges of socially just education for all students. It puts the spotlight on the pervasive nature of deficit understandings of certain groups of students. In the end, our schooling system should be judged on how it and those within it are able to deal with the most disadvantaged students. Our current group of refugee students fit within this group across a broad range of indicators; poverty, citizenship rights, permanent residency status, and access to basic human services.

Schools, then, should take up three roles in relation to supplying the educative needs of refugee students. First is the role of education as it relates to pedagogy and what we might traditionally consider the curriculum content of the school. Second is the role of citizenship and the building of a civil society. Third is the role of welfare. In the section below I unpack each of these roles and suggest “good practice possibilities” (Matthews, 2008, p. 33) for the education of refugee young people in Australian high schools.

### *Role of Providing Education*

*I try not to overgeneralize because refugee students like all students are a very diverse group and we can't say that the same things apply to everybody. But at our school, we have a large number of refugee students who have significant gaps in prior education. When I speak of significant gaps, I mean some students are coming to us with virtually no prior education. Some have a few years. Some talk about having been to school but when you ask them about it school was often in a camp, irregular, perhaps with a trained teacher perhaps not. There were huge*

*numbers, no facilities and no books. No curriculum. So it wasn't school, as we know it. Having some kind of program or strategy to address those huge gaps is vital.* – (T2-ESL teacher)

The lack of schooling in the backgrounds of many of these students means two things. First these young people have limited conceptual understanding of a Western education and discipline system. For the most part they are 'unschooled' and need support to develop conceptual frameworks of Western disciplines and school subjects, as well as ways of 'doing' school that will enable their schooling experience. Second their lack of schooling has meant that many are not print literate in any language. This has significant implications for learning an additional language, learning literacy and learning content across school subjects.

It could be argued that one of the most basic elements of the social contract of schools is to provide literate competence to its students. Certainly schools are responsible for developing literacy, which is a prerequisite for educational success (Matthews, 2008). Yet this seems to be at least a secondary consideration when schools work with refugee students, with the primary emphasis being placed on language acquisition rather than literacy competence.

*[The first issue is] the need for intensive language, English language support and assistance. That is a need that I feel is overlooked, or taken for granted or assumed. People often forget about or skip over the fact that one of the most important needs is for an ESL programme that meets their needs.* – (T2-ESL teacher)

There is no doubt that English language competence is a main issue for this group of students, as it has been for refugee students in the past. Educational researchers and those who work with refugee youth (Olliff & Couch, 2005; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006) call for increases to the quantity of intensive English language instruction and to the flexibility of delivery for this group of students, claiming that the current levels provided are insufficient for recent arrivals. The allowance of what generally amounts to six to twelve months of intensive ESL instruction has been set over many years and without consideration of students with educational backgrounds such as those of recent refugees (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). For these recent refugee arrivals it fails to provide sufficient language skills to cope successfully with school learning or to obtain success in future work or training and leaves young people with the "daunting task of acquiring English in the mainstream ... after a brief intensive program" (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006, p. 153).

However, more ESL training and support will not be enough because these students need literacy programs, not just language programs. Many of these students are not print literate in any language. There is a need for support in first time learning literacy, support that will not

be gained from traditional ESL programs because this is not their focus. For the most part, basic print literacy teaching is beyond the experience of most high school teachers. Literacy across the curriculum has been a major initiative in several policy drives within Australia (see *Literate Futures*, Luke, Freebody, & Land, 2000, as one example), but uptake of the concept and responsibility for literacy has remained minimal within mainstream secondary schooling in Australia (Luke et al., 2003) at least. So the teaching of basic beginning reading and writing is not often considered a part of high school teachers' standard skill set. However ESL teachers, such as T2 whose talk is reported here, recognize the need for literacy instruction and a *filling of the gaps* of other school-based content.

*The second one is they need some way of catching up or filling the gaps of their prior education. – (T2-ESL teacher)*

Bluntly, recognition of this need for basic literacy instruction is not enough, and it would be fair to say that in Australia “acknowledging and responding with appropriate and adequate programs to students with very high needs and no first language literacy remains a great challenge” (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006, p. 155). In one high school I visited – a high school whose success with education recently arrived refugees within a model of respect, responsibility, participation, and tolerance was inspirational across many counts – they had a keen awareness of this issue of literacy competence and its importance for improvements and development in other areas of the curriculum now, and life generally in the future. Recognition was high. However their response was a withdrawal ‘reading recovery’ style intervention utilizing basic primers well below the age and interest levels of the young people involved, and focused on basic phonemic awareness and skills acquisition. While this model was implemented with the best of intentions, and with rigorous and consistent effort by the teachers and seemingly the students involved, success was minimal, a sense of urgency was pathologized for teachers and students, and any skills actually gained of little use in the students’ mainstream classroom application of literacy.

What this example demonstrates is a disjuncture among the needs of those students who arrive in high schools without literacy in their first language, the capacity of high schools to teach early literacy skills, and a basic lack of productive models of early literacy pedagogy for those in the middle years of schooling and beyond. This disjuncture is compounded by a lack of age and interest appropriate texts for young people with low levels of English literacy, and of relevant content area texts for high school curriculum where complexity of vocabulary and conceptual understandings do not equate to increased literacy complexity as well (Miller, 2007). This school recognized the issue for these students, but when they endeavored to address the issue they turned to one of the few models available – early years pull-out intervention – and thus risked not only age appropriateness and engagement but also the chance of embedding and generalizing skills learned to classroom content.

However, T2 and other teachers interviewed as part of this study, while placing intensive language support for ESL learners as a main issue relevant to recently arrived refugee students, identified intensive instruction in literacy and all other school-based learning as a way of helping these students catch up to their age appropriate peers. In this way, she

demonstrates an informed knowledge of the past lives of the students she teaches and understands the expectations that might be legitimate based on these life patterns, but she makes a break with their backgrounds by assuming that intensive instruction and effective pedagogy will make a difference. This constitutes a new way of knowing this group of young people – the past is not ignored, but I suggest that T2 and other teachers like her have a clearly defined notion of the role and professional identity of a teacher in the learning of their students, and this allows her to discuss the issues related to refugee youth in schools through pedagogy rather than through deficit constructions of the students themselves. In any model for socially just education for refugee students, access to effective language and literacy teaching and learning must be a priority.

### *Role of Developing Citizenship and Building of a Civil Society*

*Some way of making contact and building community with the families is very important so that we see the students and know the students within their social and family context. And they the families know us. They can build trust with the school. It's a big focus for me – involving parents in education. That is often very hard when ... for people who don't speak English. It's sometimes hard even when you speak English to stay in touch with your child in high school. It's very difficult if you are from a disadvantaged group or a marginalized group. That is one of the most important things.... In our area, we have a bilingual liaison officer from Sudan, [who] is highly regarded in the community, speaks many languages. We learn about the community – what school was like, what problems they are having. We communicate. We learn different teaching strategies. – (T2-ESL teacher)*

If schools can be seen as a microcosm of society generally, then the significance of having them built on relationships and a futures orientation is highlighted. To achieve this, schools must demonstrate a vested interest in productive civic integration of their students. “Probably the biggest challenge for recently arrived young people is to identify a community to which they can safely belong” (Cassity & Gow, 2005, p. 52). Cassity and Gow (2005) use the term cultural citizenship to describe the experience of “attachment and belonging to a society at the level of day-to-day lived experience” (p. 52). Schools can and should be important sites for the development of cultural citizenship once settlement into the community has been achieved. Schools are often the initial point of contact between young people and their families and Australian society. This means that they are highly influential in the impression that these new arrivals have of Australian society generally. In addition, for recently arrived young people and their families, who for all sorts of reasons are likely to rarely leave their immediate local area of settlement (Cassity & Gow, 2005), school remains the primary opportunity for developing a sense of civic belonging and an awareness of their cultural citizenship well into the period of settlement and beyond. There is a need to create an

environment that is built on an understanding of coherence. To achieve this role of supporting the development of critical citizens, it is important for schools to establish a clear set of values. Reciprocity of respect between the cultural values of a variety of groups, including some notion of Australian cultural values, is crucial within this establishment act (Hoddinott, 2008).

When identifying some of the difficulties evident in the education of refugee young people, it remains crucial to focus on the institutional and pedagogical solutions relevant to these difficulties rather than spotlighting these difficulties of settlement as being related to deficits in students or their families.

*... and to have some two-way communication about schooling. Schooling is very different here. It is a very different system of education. It's often hard to understand. Regular meetings with parents to explain how it works here. It's very different. The idea of continuous assessment, school-based assessment is different from what people are used to; the idea of multiple pathways, the fact that you don't have to have a university degree to get a job; in Australia you can have a very good life as a plumber and a very good income. All of those things are different from other places. That is all part of communicating with the family. – (T2-ESL teacher)*

Students and families must have a sense that the school values the idea of *building community* with them, but schools must also be a place for learning important cultural content that will have currency in current and future life opportunities. This allows refugee students a safe space to reconcile their own culture with a new culture, a process that takes time and should not be taken for granted. If schools are to support the education of refugee students, they must take seriously their capacity to “socialize, acculturate, accommodate, integrate, involve, and care” (Matthews, 2008, p. 41). For all students, schools are more than places to learn curriculum content. They are places to accumulate social and cultural capital through both informal and formal credentialing practices and processes. In any model for socially just education for refugee students, the civic responsibility of school personnel, students, and others within the school community to identify commonalities and differences as a move to coherence must be a priority. The explicit teaching of values and cultural knowledge within a space of reconciliation – not integration – is vital.

### *Role of Providing Welfare*

*The need for emotional and social support. Refugee young people are generally traumatized to some degree or other. I have noticed over the many years that I have worked with them, that how trauma manifests itself is different in different cultures and different groups. This really affects their ability to pick up and start a*

*new life. There needs to be something to address those issues. Refugee students and their families have huge settlement issues – poverty, housing, family difficulties, and problems in settling in – a whole lot of personal, family, things that have to be addressed as well. – (T2-ESL teacher)*

For all of the reasons listed above, schools have a social and civic responsibility to be supportive environments for all of the students who form part of their community. It is “no exaggeration to say that refugee children’s well-being depends to a major degree on their school experiences, successes, and failures” (Matthews, 2008, p. 35). Couch (2005) proposes that the principles of any socially just education for refugee students should be incorporated within a rights model of social policy and service delivery, rather than a service model based on identified and categorized needs. A human rights approach acknowledges the past trauma young refugees have experienced and their right to a ‘normal’ life. Note how T2 (above) discusses the need for emotional and social support to help the students she teaches to overcome the past trauma that *really affects their ability to pick up and start a new life.*

Providing welfare in schools results from respect, tolerance and an overriding belief that schools have a responsibility to provide equitable participation for all students in all elements of school life. This will result when refugee students are supported adequately in classrooms and other school contexts across the full range of their needs. It will require a redistribution of resources based on a notion of redistributive social justice. It will also only be accomplished through a resistance of deficit explanations, requiring a deep understanding and respect for the strengths and resilience of these young people.

*The thing with working with refugee youth is that they are resilient and strong survivors. They have a lot of strategies, and strengths. They come to school every day, sometimes they have a long journey. They don’t give up, they never give up. They will be here till year 12. We have very few students who give up and leave school. They work really hard. They value education very much. All of these things should set them up for success if there weren’t other difficulties like the lack of schooling. Even the English language difficulties can be overcome. It’s the lack of schooling. We do not have other pathways and we need to focus on making those pathways known and attractive to families and communities... – (T2-ESL teacher)*

“Educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually dependent” (Richman, 1998a, cited in Matthews, 2008, p. 41). In any model for socially just education for refugee students the role of welfare, and the place of values such as respect, tolerance, access and participation must be a priority.

### **Bringing the Concepts Together**

In this paper I have suggested that socially just education for refugee young people being educated in Australian schools in our current context requires schools taking up at least three

roles. The first is the role of education, focused on access to high quality teaching and learning in literacy, ESL, and basic understandings of ‘doing’ school. Traditional approaches to language acquisition, while productive and effective models of pedagogy, are not adequate for the latest new arrivals to Australian schools. Many of these students have been largely unschooled until arrival in Australia, and this has implications for their engagement with school curriculum and learning. At the forefront of these implications is the lack of first language print literacy, which means that the acquisition of a new language will be severely constrained (Garcia, 2000).

The second role of education is to develop citizenship and to work to build access and participation in a civil society. This requires a commitment to creating an ethical, tolerant space for refugee young people to reconcile their culture and values with those of Australia. It also recognizes the important role of schools in providing access to social and cultural capital vital to the successful future lives of these young people. Schools must do three things to promote this space. They must have a clear set of values that frames the everyday experience of students, teachers, and other school community members’ reciprocity of respect; respect for a variety of sets of cultural values must be evident; and there must be opportunities for refugee young people to learn the cultural content and awareness required for authentic participation in Australian society.

Finally, schools must take up the role of providing spaces of welfare. All refugee young people arrive with some level of experience of stress, trauma, violence, or disengagement. Many arrive in Australia after complex and lengthy journeys since original displacement. Schools will play a significant role in alleviating resettlement issues. Learning and general well-being and welfare will always be linked for all students; however, this link is heightened for our most at-risk students.

If the schooling system of an industrialized nation such as Australia is to be judged on the basis of whether it is possible and potentially practical to provide a socially just, quality education for all students, then we must first look to how strangers and the most at-risk students are dealt with within the system. To produce an acceptable report based on this criteria, will require a consolidated approach to the increasing number of refugee young people arriving without understands of literacy, English, and Western schooling.

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