Foundation House
The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.

'SCHOOL IS WHERE YOU NEED TO BE EQUAL AND LEARN'

Insights from Students of Refugee Backgrounds on Learning and Engagement in Victorian Secondary Schools

CONTENTS

THANK YOU

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) would like to thank the student participants for generously giving up their time to be involved in this research project. The students willingly shared their insights and expertise on their education and life experiences, and we are deeply grateful for their openness. The project team would also like to thank the staff at the three secondary schools for supporting this research project. Without the commitment and dedication of the staff at these schools, this project would not have been possible.

This research project has been greatly informed by Dr Karen Block from the University of Melbourne (Associate Director, Jack Brockhoff Child Health & Wellbeing Program, Centre for Health Equity, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health; Program Coordinator, PhD Program in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies Melbourne Social Equity Institute). Karen provided advice on research design, implementation and data analysis throughout this project. The project team would like to thank Karen for her support and guidance.

QUOTES

All the quotes in this report come directly from the student participants. The title of this report *'School is where you need to be equal and learn'* is also a student quote. This project worked with 51 students across three schools, and the themes discussed are sensitive in nature. In order to avoid possible identification of schools and individual students, the quotes in this report are not recorded as being attributed to specific students or schools.

ABBREVIATIONS

ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CMY	Centre for Multicultural Youth
CECV	Catholic Education Commission of Victoria
DET	Department of Education and Training
EAL	English as an Additional Language
FASSTT	Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma
Foundation House	The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture
ISV	Independent Schools Victoria
MEA	Multicultural Education Aide
RESP	Refugee Education Support Program
SRC	Student Representative Council
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VFST	Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture

"When someone came here last year, it's like a baby is born. They're one year old and when they try to walk, his mum is going to take their hand and walk them through slowly. Same with teachers. If you help your students and explain to them, they'll improve in one month maybe because they're motivated. In any class, everything depends on the teachers. The way they teach the students matters."

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a research project conducted by the Schools Support Program at the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. (Foundation House). This project sought out the insights of students of refugee backgrounds on the barriers and facilitators to learning and engagement at school. Through this project the Schools Support Program was able to learn directly from students of refugee backgrounds, and position them, through their lived experience, as experts on 'what works' to support them at school.

Between May and December 2017, the project team conducted focus groups at three Victorian secondary schools, with 51 students (aged 13–19). The students were all from refugee backgrounds and had arrived in Australia within the past seven years. They were from a range of countries of origin, including Afghanistan, South Sudan, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Iraq, Eritrea, Tibet and Papua New Guinea.

The Schools Support Program chose to partner with three secondary schools that have long histories of working closely with Foundation House. All three schools have previously participated in the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) and have a strong commitment to supporting students of refugee backgrounds.

This research project identified barriers and facilitators for learning and engagement, as well as student-derived strategies in areas including, learning, peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, careers and pathways, multiple pressures and mental health, transition and orientation, school engagement with families, community links, financial hardship, and material assistance.

Teachers play a key role in supporting students of refugee backgrounds to reach their academic potential and improve wellbeing outcomes. The participants reflected on the impact of teachers providing additional and proactive support to assist students to improve their English language skills. They highlighted the need for teachers to take a strengths-based approach to support students to make informed decisions regarding careers and pathways. Loneliness and isolation were common themes across the focus groups. The participants spoke of the positive impact of teachers and school staff supporting students of refugee backgrounds to form new friendships.

Racism and discrimination emerged as a key issue across the thematic areas. The participants identified that racism has a significant impact on their experiences at school. Students spoke about being laughed at by other students for making mistakes in English and feeling excluded. They also identified the importance of schools actively promoting inclusion and celebrating diversity.

There is a growing body of literature on the schooling experiences of students of refugee backgrounds. [1,2,3,4,5,6,7] This project sought to build on the existing literature, with a particular focus on the barriers and facilitators for learning and engagement that affect students of refugee backgrounds in mainstream schools. The project team identified that there was need for further research to seek out the insights of the students themselves.

The Schools Support Program plans to utilise the findings presented in this report to promote evidence-informed practice regarding the learning and wellbeing needs of students of refugee backgrounds. It is hoped that this report will contribute to improving the educational experiences and outcomes for students.

[1] Block, K., Cross, S., Riggs, E. & Gibbs, L. (2014). Supporting schools to create an inclusive environment for refugee students. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18 (12), 1337–1355.

[2] Baak, M., Miller, E., Sullivan. A., & Heugh, K. (2018). *Improving educational outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds in the South Australian Certificate of Education project : a case study of two Catholic schools.* Adelaide: University of South Australia.

[3] Correa-Velez, I., Gifford, S. M., & Barnett, A. G. (2010). Longing to belong: social inclusion and wellbeing among youth with refugee backgrounds in the first three years in Melbourne, Australia. *Social Science & Medicine*, (8), 1399–1408.

[4] Miller, E., Ziaian, T., & Esterman, A. (2018). Australian school practices and the education experiences of students with a refugee background: a review of the literature. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(4), 339–359.

[5] Hammond, J. & Miller, J. (2015). *Classrooms of possibility.* Newtown: Primary English Teaching Association Australia.

[6] Matthew, J (2008). Schooling and settlement: refugee education in Australia. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 18 (1), 31–45.

[7] Taylor, S., & Sidhu, R. K. (2012). Supporting refugee students in schools: what constitutes inclusive education? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16 (1), 39–56.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

THEMES	FINDINGS
Learning	• Students of refugee backgrounds benefit from extra learning support (for example access to teachers outside class time, mentors and homework clubs). • Teachers have an important role to play in creating a classroom environment where students feel confident to participate in class discussions. • Students feel supported in their learning when teachers utilise EAL strategies, such as glossaries, visuals to support written content, and hands-on activities, and provide students with opportunities to attend excursions. • Students of refugee backgrounds may need additional support to access and use technology. • Students want to be actively involved with their teachers in developing plans to address the gaps in their learning (for example, choosing between modified or unmodified work).
Peer relationships	• Newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds would like their teachers' assistance and support to make friends (for example through group work, sport, structured activities and games). • Students feel supported when schools actively address racism and discrimination. This includes addressing less overt incidences of interpersonal racism (such as laughing at a student's name accent or mistakes in English). • Students feel supported when schools address bullying and communicate their policies to all students. • Students feel supported when their school community celebrates diversity. In particular, students would like schools to celebrate/recognise specific religious and cultural events as they occur across the calendar year.
Teacher–student relationships	• Students of refugee backgrounds often face barriers in advocating for their own learning and wellbeing needs. Providing proactive support can have a positive impact on these students. • Teacher attitudes and behaviour, such as demonstrating an empathetic and supportive approach, can have a significant impact on students' sense of wellbeing and belonging. • It is important that relevant staff are informed about the prior education experiences of each student. This includes gaps in learning, strengths and skills. • Students sometimes feel that their lack of fluent English is equated with low intelligence, a low level of maturity or a lack of academic potential. • Students feel supported by teachers who make time to assist them outside class time.

Careers and pathways	• Students of refugee backgrounds often lack the information they require to make informed decisions about subject selection and VCE/VCAL options. • Many students require additional support to navigate career pathways (for example information about pathways in their first language, information about university/TAFE open days, and work experience opportunities). • Students appreciate flexibility from their school when navigating course selection (for example allowing students to 'sit in' on different subjects before they are required to select them, information in their first language, and flexible learning options for senior students). • It is important that careers counsellors are available and welcoming to students.
Multiple pressures and mental health	• It is important that teachers are aware that students of refugee backgrounds may be experiencing multiple pressures and competing demands, and that this knowledge informs the school's responses to behavioural concerns. • Students benefit when schools acknowledge their strengths, while also supporting them to develop their wellbeing and positive mental health.
Transition and orientation	• Newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds often enrol at school mid-term/mid-year and miss out on the transition support that their peers receive when they commence secondary school in Year 7. • Newly arrived students benefit from having a buddy assigned to them. For some students, it is important that this buddy is a same-language peer. • Some students benefit from receiving information about their new school in their first language (for example from an MEA and/or translated written information).
School engagement with families	• Students of refugee backgrounds benefit when schools support parents/carers to engage in their children's education (for example by providing qualified interpreters, translated information and organising information sessions).
Community links	• Students of refugee backgrounds are often unaware of the local community agencies, activities and programs that are available to them. Students benefit when schools provide them with this information.
Financial hardship and material assistance	• It is important that schools are aware that some families of refugee background experience financial hardship. Students and families benefit when schools proactively offer support to assist students to access the resources required for learning (such as textbooks, laptops and stationery).

OVERVIEW OF FOUNDATION HOUSE AND THE SCHOOLS SUPPORT PROGRAM

THE VICTORIAN FOUNDATION FOR SURVIVORS OF TORTURE (FOUNDATION HOUSE)

The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST, also known as Foundation House) provides services to people of refugee backgrounds in Victoria who have experienced torture and other traumatic events in their country of origin or while fleeing those countries.

Politically neutral and non-aligned, Foundation House is a not-for-profit organisation. Working throughout Victoria, Foundation House is a state-wide organisation offering services in metropolitan, regional and rural areas.

Foundation House is a member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT), a network of Australia's eight specialist rehabilitation agencies that work to reduce the impact of torture and trauma on individuals, families and communities.

Each year, Foundation House delivers services to approximately 5,000 survivors of torture and other traumatic events who come from dozens of countries of origin. We work directly with individual survivors, their families and communities, as well as in settings such as schools, primary health care and mainstream mental health. We provide professional education and training to over 5,000 service providers annually to build their capacity to work with people of refugee backgrounds. We also conduct research and provide policy advice to government on matters relating to people of refugee backgrounds.

THE FOUNDATION HOUSE SCHOOLS SUPPORT PROGRAM

The Foundation House Schools Support Program assists schools across Victoria, supporting their work with students of refugee backgrounds and their families. The program recognises the role of schools in supporting recovery, resettlement and integration processes for students and their families, whose lives have been disrupted by conflict, persecution and long-term displacement.

Specialist services offered by the program include: participation in the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP), professional learning workshops, partnerships and collaborations with schools on school-led initiatives, secondary consultations and resources. Due to the support of the Department of Education and Training (DET), these services are provided at no cost to schools across Victoria.

The Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) is a key component of the Schools Support Program, and is delivered in partnership with the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), and in collaboration with the Catholic Education Commission Victoria (CECV) and Independent Schools Victoria (ISV). RESP works with schools in areas of significant refugee settlement to improve responsiveness to students of refugee backgrounds and their families, using a whole-school approach.[8] Schools are supported to increase their capacity to provide high-quality and inclusive education, and to have a positive impact on the educational and wellbeing outcomes of students of refugee backgrounds. Between 2012 and 2018 more than 129 schools across Victoria participated in RESP.

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[8] Western Australia Department of Health. Growing and Developing Health Relationships: health promoting schools framework https://gdhr.wa.gov.au/-/health-promoting-schools-framework (Accessed 07.02.2019)

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

REFUGEE EXPERIENCES

The pre-arrival experiences of students of refugee backgrounds are characterised by exposure to violence and loss, persecution, perpetration of human rights violations and forced displacement.[9] Displaced populations are often deprived of adequate food, shelter, access to health services, education and basic security.[10]

The effects of pre-arrival experiences may persist long after arrival in a safe country. As well as impacting upon individual survivors, refugee experiences can undermine cohesion and supportive relationships within families and communities.[11]

Once families arrive in Australia, the resettlement process is complex and ongoing. Along with managing the effects of trauma and separation, families may face challenges gaining stable employment, securing affordable housing and learning an additional language.[12]

Students of refugee backgrounds will have experienced a level of change unprecedented in the lives of most of their Australian-born peers. Students who are newly arrived in Australia are required to engage in a new education system, build new social connections and move through the developmental challenges of childhood and adolescence in a new culture.[13] In addition to this, many students of refugee backgrounds will have experienced limited and/or disrupted schooling. As a result, their learning needs differ from Australian-born students and other EAL learners.

It is important to recognise that in addition to these challenging experiences, students of refugee backgrounds and their families bring a range of skills, strengths and assets to school communities.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS OF REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

Schools play a vital role in supporting students of refugee backgrounds to resettle in a new country. Supportive school cultures can improve students' mental health and wellbeing, enhance educational outcomes, and promote social connections between families and school communities.[14]

Schools are uniquely positioned to support recovery, build resilience, and reduce the vulnerability of students of refugee backgrounds. Schools, beyond their role in providing education, are well placed to promote social inclusion, support freedom from discrimination, and provide important life and work skills. By taking a whole-school approach,[15] schools are able to implement a range of strategies to support students of refugee backgrounds.

9 Block, K., Young, D.,& Molyneaux, R. (2017). *Ucan2: youth transition support – evaluation report*, University of Melbourne: Centre for Health Equity.
10 Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST). (2017). *A framework for community capacity building*.
11 ibid.
12 Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST). (2016). *School's in for refugees: a whole-school approach to supporting students and families of refugee background* (2nd edn), http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees.
13 ibid.
14 ibid.
15 Western Australia Department of Health. Growing and developing healthy relationships: health promoting schools framework https://gdhr.wa.gov.au/-/health-promoting-schools-framework (Accessed 23.01.2019).

PROJECT DESIGN

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Between May and December 2017, the Schools Support Program conducted student focus groups at three Victorian secondary schools.

The design and implementation of this research project was informed by the principles of youth participatory research.[16] The project sought to engage with the students respectfully and ethically, including acknowledging the power imbalance between the project team (adults, professionals) and the participants (students, limited experience with research, EAL students).[17] In order to create an engaging and empowering experience for the participants, the project team:

- provided participants with support in their first language as required. For example, Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) were present at two of the focus groups at School 3 to support student participation.
- used focus groups as the principal means of data collection to ensure that literacy skills were not a requirement for participation.
- employed a range of activities within the focus groups sessions in order to allow participants to contribute in a variety of ways.

This research project received ethics approval from the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Ethics Committee.

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS

The Schools Support Program partnered with three Victorian secondary schools. The schools all have an EAL program, have a significant number of students of refugee backgrounds, and have previously participated in the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP). The schools are all located in Victoria, and throughout this report are referred to as School 1 (South-East Metro), School 2 (West Metro) and School 3 (Regional Victoria).

SCHOOL 3
28 STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

REGIONAL

METRO

SCHOOL 2 - WEST
14 STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

SCHOOL 1 - SOUTH EAST
9 STUDENT PARTICIPANTS
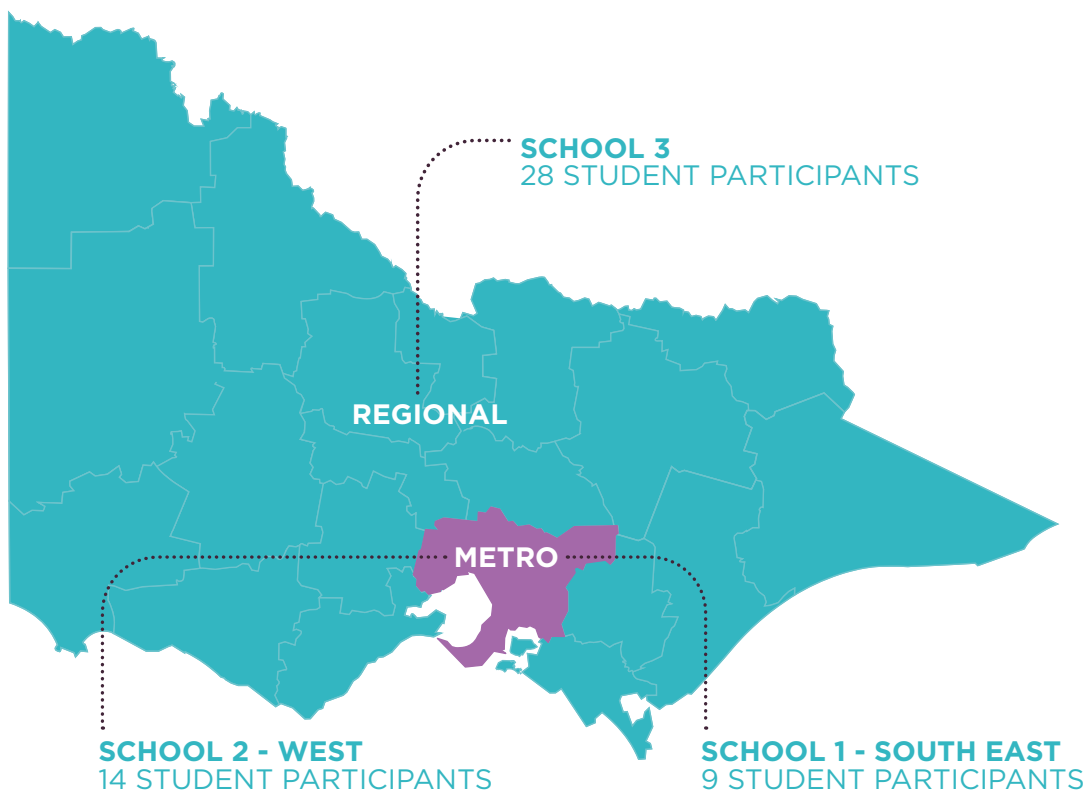
[16] Bagnoli, A., & Clark, A. (2010). Focus groups with young people: a participatory approach to research planning. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13(1), 101–119.
[17] Saks, M. & Allsop, J. (2013). *Researching health: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods*, Sage: London.

The Schools Support Program has developed strong relationships with the three secondary schools over many years. The schools all have a strong commitment to supporting the learning and wellbeing of students of refugee backgrounds. The project team was mindful that in speaking with students about the challenges they face at school, the participants might have disclosed issues that required immediate action. By collaborating with schools where the Schools Support Program had strong and trusting relationships, the project team was confident that if issues arose, they would be addressed. The leadership teams at all three schools enthusiastically agreed to participate in the project, demonstrating their commitment to supporting students of refugee backgrounds.

STAFF INTERVIEWS

Prior to conducting the focus group sessions with students, the project team held meetings with the leadership staff at the three schools. Following these meetings, the project team conducted interviews with two staff members from each school. The staff interviews provided the project team with a deeper understanding of the context for each school. Knowledge of each school's context allowed the project team to more readily understand the discussions in the student focus group sessions (including acronyms and abbreviations, names of internal school programs, etc.) without the need to interrupt with clarifying questions. It is not, however, in the scope of this project to analyse and report on the staff interviews.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The project team established selection criteria for participants with the aim of ensuring that the students were well placed to participate in the focus group sessions. Students were eligible to participate if they:

- were in Years 8–12 (the age range was flexible within these year levels)
- had been enrolled in the school for at least six months
- were of refugee backgrounds (this was broadly defined and included those currently seeking asylum)
- were at low risk of vulnerability (the project team asked the school staff to use their professional discretion to ensure that students were not invited to participate if they were experiencing significant mental health issues, had a current significant welfare issue, or there was a concern that participation in the project would be likely to have a detrimental effect on the students' wellbeing).

The school leadership staff were asked to invite students who met the selection criteria to attend an information session. These sessions addressed the aims of the project and expected commitment, as well as the benefits and risks associated with the project. The students were assured that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any point. They were provided with a letter outlining the project for their parents/carers. The letters were translated into key languages and students were informed that a telephone interpreter could be arranged to explain the project and obtain parent/carer consent.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 51 students (aged 13–19) participated in this project. The students were all from refugee backgrounds and had arrived in Australia within the past seven years. They were from a range of countries of origin, including Afghanistan, South Sudan, Burma (Myanmar), Sri Lanka, Iraq, Eritrea, Tibet and Papua New Guinea. Data was not collected regarding whether the participants had attended an English Language School prior to enrolling in mainstream secondary school. The student focus groups had an even gender balance with roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. The participants were in Years 8–12, although the year levels of participants varied at each school. This was due to the unique structure of each school and student availability.

STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

Across the three schools, a total of six focus groups were established with approximately 10 participants in each group. At School 2, one student participated in an interview, in place of a focus group, as the student was the only person at the campus who chose to participate in the project.

The project team met with each focus group for two sessions. The agenda for the second session was open-ended and designed to build on the first session. The structure and approach of the focus group sessions was designed to position the participants as 'experts'. The project team sought out the advice and perspectives of the participants regarding trends, issues and challenges facing students of refugee backgrounds. Students were not directly asked about their personal experiences, although some students chose to share their own stories.

The project team used a range of strategies to ensure that the focus group sessions were engaging and inclusive. Some strategies included reading aloud all written materials, asking open-ended questions, and providing participants with first-language support if required. The project team were keen to support the range of language abilities in each group. In pair and group discussions, the participants were given the opportunity to speak in their preferred languages and then summarise their ideas in English. At School 3, MEAs were present at two of the focus groups to support student participation.

The focus group discussions were semi-structured, with open questions allowing the students to explore the identified topics of interest. The project team also used a range of activities to encourage participation in the focus group sessions. These included case studies, brainstorming, pair work, small group work, formulating questions for students in the other focus groups, and a 'Magic Tool' activity. (See Appendixes I and II for the Focus Group Guides.)

In the 'Magic Tool' activity the participants were each given a colourful straw. The project team advised the participants that the straw was a 'Magic Tool' that would allow the students to change things at their school. The students were then asked: 'If you had the power to change one thing in this school, what would it be?' The 'Magic Tool' activity encouraged the participants to think creatively and brainstorm innovative solutions.

The students were invited to formulate questions, which were then posed to participants at the other schools. This activity provided the students with the opportunity to contribute to shaping the research project. It also helped the students to understand the scope and scale of the project.

The project team prepared two short case studies that told the stories of Jo and Layla, two students of refugee backgrounds who had recently arrived in Australia. The participants were asked to read the case study and consider what might be 'going on' for Jo and Layla, and to provide advice to Jo and Layla's teachers about how best to support these students.

CASE STUDY 1 – Jo is new to Australia and has been going to your school for about six months. He is often late and sometimes comes to class without pens and books. He often does not do his homework. When teachers talk to him about these things, he gets angry and sometimes walks out of the classroom.

CASE STUDY 2 – Layla can speak two other languages but is new to learning English. She only came to your school last term. Sometimes she doesn't understand what the teacher wants her to do in class. It's often difficult for her to do homework.

STUDENT FEEDBACK TO SCHOOL STAFF

Following the focus group sessions, the project team offered participants the option of providing feedback directly to school leadership staff. The project team advised the students that the feedback sessions were optional and regardless of their choice, the school would be provided with a copy of the final report that would include de-identified, aggregated data from all three schools.

At School 1 the students advised the project team that they felt confident there were existing student voice structures (such as the Student Representative Council – SRC), which enabled them to regularly provide feedback to school leadership staff. At School 2 and School 3 the students chose to provide feedback to staff. The project team consulted with the students to determine which staff would be invited. The project team then created a summary of the key ideas generated during the focus group sessions, under the headings 'What helps?', 'What doesn't help?' and 'Strategies'. The project team met with the students to discuss the draft summary, and once the wording was finalised the staff were invited into the room. The students formed a 'panel of experts' and the staff were able to ask questions about the summary.

The feedback sessions provided the students with the opportunity to experience self-advocacy, as well as promoting student voice within their school communities. At School 2 the staff indicated that they would support the students to work with the SRC to enact some of the student-identified strategies. At School 3, the staff stated they would investigate developing a new process to support students when reporting experiences of racism.

DATA ANALYSIS

The focus groups were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The project team used the NVivo program to code and organise the data. The transcripts were coded, and at least two members of the project team read and analysed each data set, enhancing the credibility of the analysis. A thematic approach was used to analyse the data. Individual quotes were coded using multiple 'nodes'/NVivo codes. Emerging impressions from the data were recorded as 'memos', and these informed identification of key themes. An inductive analysis approach was used to ensure that the key themes were supported by data, and not tied to existing research preconceptions.[18]

PRESENTATIONS TO PARTICIPANTS AND SCHOOL STAFF

In late 2018, the project team reconnected with the students and staff at the three schools. The project team delivered presentations to the participants and school staff, to report back on the key findings of the research project, and provide an update on the dissemination activities. These presentations were important, as the project team was keen to ensure that the participants had the opportunity to hear about the final outcomes of the research project and strengthen their knowledge about research processes.

LIMITATIONS OF PROJECT DESIGN

This research project had a range of possible limitations. The small sample (51 participants) meant that the findings of this research are not necessarily representative. The schools that were selected to participate had a long history of involvement with Foundation House and are strongly committed to supporting students of refugee backgrounds. Only students with a low risk of vulnerability were included in this project. This may have had an impact on the data collected. It would be of interest to conduct a similar research project with a wider range of schools and students.

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[18] Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–13.

KEY THEMES

This section presents the key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. The key themes include: learning, peer relationships, teacher–student relationships, careers and pathways, multiple pressures and mental health, transition and orientation, school engagement with families, community links, financial hardship and material assistance. Racism and discrimination emerged as a key topic across many of the thematic areas and thus this topic is not presented as a key theme, but rather, it is incorporated across the report.

LEARNING

LEARNING	• Students of refugee backgrounds benefit from extra learning support (for example access to teachers outside class time, mentors and homework clubs). • Teachers have an important role to play in creating a classroom environment where students feel confident to participate in class discussions. • Students feel supported in their learning when teachers utilise EAL strategies, such as glossaries, visuals to support written content, and hands-on activities, and provide students with opportunities to attend excursions. • Students of refugee backgrounds may need additional support to access and use technology. • Students want to be actively involved with their teachers in developing plans to address the gaps in their learning (for example, choosing between modified or unmodified work).

Learning emerged as a key topic for the participants. This area generated significant discussion across all the focus groups.

The participants identified a number of facilitators that they felt enhanced their ability to learn at school and acquire English language skills. These included: attending an English Language School/Centre; receiving extra help from teachers outside class time; opportunities to practise oral language skills in class; support from bilingual staff/MEAs; fun activities that allow students to practise English outside the classroom; access to online translation tools; use of visuals to support understanding of texts; attending a homework club; having a mentor; and home tutoring.

Students of refugee backgrounds are sometimes seen by schools as a homogenous cohort with common challenges and learning needs. However, the students within this project identified that they were a highly diverse group in regard to their educational histories and support needs. Some students had highly disrupted education experiences, some had limited access to formal schooling prior to arriving in Australia, while others had largely uninterrupted education experiences.

The students shared similar concerns regarding a lack of confidence in practising English in the classroom, and the frustrations of trying to catch up academically with their peers. Students spoke about not feeling comfortable to participate in class discussions.

Even if you know the answer, you'd be scared to answer because you're not confident about this.

Participants identified a number of factors that may hinder student confidence:

I would like to set up a rule … to make sure that it's a safe place to practise English. Not laughing when you talk when things are wrong.

We don't have the opportunity to perform here or show anyone the talent that we have.

The participants also spoke about feeling reluctant to request assistance from their teachers.

He [Jo] will be very shy and nervous or scared to come and ask the teacher and ask for help.

It's hard because even when you go and ask they're explaining in English so you get more confused, so we don't want to go anymore and ask. They [teachers] try really hard but we're still stuck.

In secondary schools, students are often expected to show initiative and actively seek help when required. Negative experiences of seeking assistance may impact on students' confidence to request support from their teachers.

The participants were presented with a case study in which Jo, a newly arrived student, displayed feelings of anger and avoidance in the classroom. They were asked to consider 'What might be going on for Jo?'. In response, several participants explained that frustrations around learning might be behind his behaviour.

Because of the language barrier between the student and the teacher, Jo can't express his feelings, so he chooses to escape instead of confronting the teacher.

For some people, they get really angry when they don't understand something. They feel like they are below everyone. That could have an effect on his mental point of view.

Participants spoke of the challenge of having learnt curriculum content in another language, and therefore being familiar with the concepts but unfamiliar with the vocabulary required to demonstrate their knowledge in English. Some students proposed that having more time to focus solely on learning English prior to commencing other subjects would aid their ability to access the curriculum.

The participants spoke about a desire to be involved in the decision-making regarding how teachers support them to learn and overcome the gaps in their knowledge. The students were asked to provide their advice, through the lens of the Layla case study, on whether Layla should be given the same tasks as her peers with additional support, or a modified curriculum. This question generated lively discussion. Some students advocated for Layla to be given 'differentiated tasks'.[19]

If she's learning English only for a short amount of time, I think it's good to give her the easy work first and then see how she's going.

Other participants felt strongly that Layla should be given the same work as her peers with additional support (for example 'high challenge, high support').[20]

Give them the same work and a little bit more help because if they give them easier assignments then they feel like they should have it easy throughout the whole high school year. Year 11 and 12, it's not going to happen.

Despite the range of responses, the students generally felt that teachers should consult with newly arrived students regarding decisions relating to their learning.

The first thing, the teacher has to check. Ask which option is the best for you, what do you think, and provide some ideas, some options for Layla.

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[19] Department of Education and Training, (2017). *High impact teaching strategies: excellence in teaching and learning*, 28.
[20] Hammond, J. (2006). High challenge, high support: Integrating language and content instruction for diverse learners in an English literature classroom, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(4), 269–283.

Technology was another key focus of discussion. For some students technology was identified as a facilitator that assisted their learning, while for others, technology represented a barrier.

In the [refugee] camp, they never use computers, but here, they give the computer to you to take back home, but never teach you how to type.

It's [technology] helpful, but they [students] need time. Most of them didn't have access to technology.

The participants proposed a range of strategies that schools can use to ensure access and build student confidence when using technology for learning. These included schools providing laptops/devices, ensuring that students have internet access at home, informing students about apps that can support them to practise English and allowing to use online translation tools. For some students their first language is widely spoken globally and there is online content they can access to support their learning. For other students, who speak languages that are not widely spoken and/or where there are limited online resources available, they may face additional barriers to accessing online content compared to other EAL students.

"I think for people like us when they first come to a new school, a new country, the worst thing is that they feel lonely ... Because anyone in our position we've lost all our friends so when you first come here you don't know anyone and any activity that gets you to know more people will really help."

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

PEER RELATIONSHIPS	• Newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds would like their teachers' assistance and support to make friends (for example through group work, sport, structured activities and games). • Students feel supported when schools actively address racism and discrimination. This includes addressing less overt incidences of interpersonal racism (such as laughing at a student's name accent or mistakes in English). • Students feel supported when schools address bullying and communicate their policies to all students. • Students feel supported when their school community celebrates diversity. In particular, students would like schools to celebrate/recognise specific religious and cultural events as they occur across the calendar year.

Students who are newly arrived in Australia face the challenge of starting again in forming new connections and friendships. The participants highlighted the important role that schools can play in proactively creating a culture that promotes belonging, respect and inclusion for all students.

When asked to formulate questions that the project team would then ask the students at the other schools, the participants focused on peer relationships, inclusion and respect.

> *Do you feel that Australian kids look down on you?*

> *Do you feel other EAL students look down on you?*

> *Are you mixing with Australian students?*

The students acknowledged that addressing bullying and promoting inclusion are difficult issues for schools to address. The participants did not feel that their schools' actions solved these problems, nevertheless the actions taken by the schools were identified as positive and welcome interventions.

For some students of refugee backgrounds, their experience of making friends is hindered by racism and language barriers. Some students shared their personal stories of racism.

> *I was in this school, I went straight to class, I sit next to Aussie boy but he just moved away to the next table. I just was disappointed, then I never try again to sit there.*

> *We want to be friends with Aussie people but Aussie people are just like 'Just go back to your country', so we can't be friends with them.*

The students spoke about the negative impact of being teased and laughed at because of their names, their accents and mistakes in English pronunciation. These experiences were identified having adversely affected the students' confidence and their sense of self.

> *I think some people when they come they have a little bit of an accent, as I have a little bit and some of their friends or classmates make fun of it. I think it's not a good thing because they feel so embarrassed and after that they won't talk any more because they think if they talk more they'll bully them more, so they keep quiet. It makes them hate school and studying and stuff, I think.*

> *Some people might even make fun of or even tease. They may keep on saying, 'You need to learn more English.' It can be difficult for some people. It's very difficult to have an English accent and at the same time have the mother language accent.*

> *You lose your confidence when they laugh at you. You don't want to talk any more.*

When asked what would help newly arrived students to feel safe and happy at school, one student reflected:

Respect for the fact we have real names. They just call other names, bad words. So it's bullying … they say our names in different ways, so it's no respect. They have to say my name.

Although most comments about feeling bullied or looked down upon related to how newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds felt they were treated by their peers who are fluent English speakers, some comments were made about bullying behaviour within EAL classrooms.

The bad thing I feel in the school is not with the other Aussie kids, just for the EAL students. I feel that many times I have a friend look down at my English ability … I feel that kind of student looks down on me because my English is not as good … I feel all the Aussie students are very helpful … when you ask for some help they will help you, support you, but the problem is communication.

Some participants reported experiencing both welcoming peers who embraced the school's diversity, as well as others who displayed racist attitudes.

Some are racist and stuff like that. Depends on the people though, on the kids. They're all different. You cannot say they all are the same. Some don't mind and they love other people's culture and they love to be with new cultures and new kids, but some think, 'Oh my god, because they're different, no.'

It can be challenging to establish friendships when students are newly arrived in Australia. However, the participants identified facilitators that supported them to form new connections and helped mitigate against the negative effects of racism. These included playing sports, being assigned to groups for class activities, support from the school's wellbeing team and being assigned a buddy when they were new to the school. The participants reflected on the importance of teachers supporting students of refugee backgrounds to build connections with peers from the same language background, as well as teachers 'mixing' students so they get to know students from different language backgrounds.

EAL classes were identified as being important in assisting students to develop their English skills. However, some of the participants noted that the separation of EAL and non-EAL students into different classes created a potential barrier preventing students of refugee backgrounds from establishing friendships and connections with other students across the school.

Some students recognised that it can be difficult for school staff to address bullying, but reflected on some of the positive measures their schools had taken. The students spoke about schools using anonymous bullying surveys to better understand student experiences. Importantly, it was mentioned that surveys with multiple-choice questions can be difficult to complete due to limited English literacy. Anti-bullying messages at school assemblies can also have an important impact.

The teachers can always help … It can be effective to show the guidelines, 'We don't tolerate this at this school.' It can help.

Students reflected on their experiences of Harmony Day and Diversity Day. These events are designed to celebrate cultural diversity and promote social inclusion. Participants spoke about the positive impact of these events and noted that they provide students with the opportunity to learn about valuing cultural diversity. Overwhelmingly, the participants indicated that acknowledging key cultural events and celebrations across the year would allow students to gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of each other's culture.

If the school helped them to celebrate that [different cultural events] in the school that actually helps them to feel confident and comfortable in the school and feel belong[ing] to the school … the mainstream students would actually get the knowledge about their culture as well.

It [Harmony/Diversity Day] helps understand different cultures. If you know the other person, you don't necessarily reject them; you can accept them and be friends with them. So, that's an important thing … It could help but it's not a big deal because it's just one day.

Well, I haven't tried celebrating different celebrations within the school but I think it'd be pretty good because you don't necessarily have all of this in just one day. You can spread it across the year and it doesn't disturb your learning or anything. You just get to know more about everyone's culture around you, so you can connect more with your friends.

Learning about other students' cultures and having the opportunity to share their own culture was important, as it provides a more nuanced understanding about the nature of identity.

There's lots of people, they don't know about our culture. They just see our scarf, they just believe that we are Islam, but some of them are racist and they don't know anything about [our] culture, they don't know which country we are, they just know that we are Islam. When we wear our traditional clothes, then they will believe which culture we are.

Being a member of a small minority language or cultural group within a school community can create additional challenges during Harmony Day or Diversity Day celebrations.

Some cultures are more people, but for me, I'm the only one in the school and I can't dance or anything, all I can do is sit there and watch.

"When I first came here, I was legit alone. I had no friends, nothing. I couldn't even make friends. I had a teacher I could relate to, our EAL teacher … She has a lot of students coming from everywhere and she's always trying to have conversations with everyone, so that helps."

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

TEACHER– STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS	• Students of refugee backgrounds often face barriers in advocating for their own learning and wellbeing needs. Providing proactive support can have a positive impact on these students. • Teacher attitudes and behaviour, such as demonstrating an empathetic and supportive approach, can have a significant impact on students' sense of wellbeing and belonging. • It is important that relevant staff are informed about the prior education experiences of each student. This includes gaps in learning, strengths and skills. • Students sometimes feel that their lack of fluent English is equated with low intelligence, a low level of maturity or a lack of academic potential. • Students feel supported by teachers who make time to assist them outside class time.

From the nearly 15 hours of conversation with 51 secondary students of refugee background, one thing was unequivocal: positive relationships with teachers and school staff are vital. The students spoke about the benefits of positive relationships with school staff as well as the adverse impact of negative relationships.

Some students found it difficult to form a positive relationship with some of their teachers and had experienced a range of negative attitudes, including ignorance, discrimination and indifference. However, the students also had experiences with supportive and understanding teachers. This support was greatly valued. When asked to develop questions that the project team would ask the students at the other schools, the participants posed the question:

Do you feel that teachers treat you differently because of your background?

The participants provided a range of strategies to assist school staff to build positive, supportive relationships with newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds. These included:

- ensuring that all staff are aware when a student is newly arrived in Australia
- ensuring that teachers are aware of a student's English ability
- not expecting new students to have the confidence to seek out assistance from teachers
- proactively checking in with students
- looking for positives in the student's work and praising them
- speaking to students discretely when there are concerns about academic progress or behaviour
- utilising EAL teaching strategies to support students.

The impact of caring teachers was highlighted.

The first time I came to Australia, I never made a friend, but I loved to talk to my teachers. They understand how hard it is for us when we are new to this country.

In Year 9, I had an EAL teacher … she was very helpful for me … she found this engineering camp and asked me if I wanted to join. She helped me write up the application, send it in and everything. It was helpful for someone to look at that for me. I didn't know anything at the time.

Wellbeing staff can have an important role in providing proactive support to newly arrived students.

Ms K [wellbeing coordinator] is smart … I don't know how she knows that the student is new, but she asks the new students certain questions like, are you okay and stuff. The students can talk to her at recess and lunch.

Building trusting relationships with school staff enables students to feel confident to seek support regarding wellbeing and mental health issues.

If I have some depression, I cannot focus on my study, so if I have something in my heart, the teacher has to help … if I don't trust anyone, I cannot tell them.

Respecting privacy, and not compelling students to disclose their pre-arrival experiences is very important. The participants spoke about the need for teachers to give students a choice as to whether they would like to share information about their experiences prior to arriving in Australia.

I think some people do not have a good memory from the background. They don't want to talk about what happened and what caused them to move here … questions about their background like, 'How was life in your back country?', 'What can you remember?' … It makes them even worse. I'm here. I moved here to forget that country, why are you questioning again? … But some students like to share their information and experience. It's up to the student … Some people like to keep it secret or private, they don't want to talk about what it was like, in the background.

The participants noted that sometimes they feel that teachers don't have enough time to address the learning needs of students of refugee backgrounds. They reflected that teachers sometimes seem frustrated at having to repeat instructions and lack strategies for teaching EAL learners. Additionally, some teachers did not seem to be aware about the backgrounds of their newly enrolled students, or understand the impact that refugee experiences may have on learning and wellbeing.

I think my teacher doesn't know I'm new to the country and [that] English is my second language.

The other thing is most teachers have the understanding of these specific students coming from a refugee background and they know their attitude, but maybe, in some cases, the teacher must have a better understanding of the student's background.

Students provided examples of situations when teachers expressed surprise at the student's lack of knowledge in front of their peers, and made them feel embarrassed.

For me … I was doing home economics. I got to class and the teacher told me to pick something up. I didn't know what it was because it's probably not called the same thing [in the student's language] and she was like, 'How do you not know what that is?'

Some of the older students who participated in the project highlighted concerns about teachers equating a student's English proficiency with their intelligence or maturity. They expressed frustration at being treated 'like a child' or having a teacher raise their voice in an attempt to make the student understand them.

When you ask the teacher for help, their attitude is good and they will help you, but I would prefer if they consider us as adults with broken English, not kids.

Classroom teachers were identified as having a critical role to play in creating an environment where students feel safe and respected. The students also mentioned the importance of teachers providing students with support to build connections and make new friends.

During class, if the teacher mixes the students in different tables, like I'm from Afghan background and other one is English or something. That environment becomes friendly with every student. That will be helpful. It's the responsibility of teachers to have a friendly environment in her or his class.

Teachers have an important role to play in addressing racism. Actively addressing racism is crucial for all students, and is of particular importance for students of refugee backgrounds, who may have experienced racial and religious persecution prior to arriving in Australia. In one focus group, a student spoke about a lesson in which their peers made discriminatory or derogatory comments about their religious group.

We were in the school, in the class, and the topic was about Muslims. Everyone was talking about Muslims. My teacher said, 'What will be the impact if we make a mosque … ?' Some students said we will be attacked or stuff … but some students, they talk positive about Muslims. That was good. The good thing was [two staff] came to class and they said we have to respect other cultures and you don't need to talk about other religions and stuff. That was good … that was very good for me.

"For the teacher, they need to understand that if they give advice, they can change a student's future. It's the little things that make up the big things. You start small, but it's the teacher that drives you towards the pathway. The teacher needs to be really careful what they say and how they word stuff … like discrimination. You don't want to say they can't do this … We all do lots of things."

STUDENT PARTICIPANT

CAREERS AND PATHWAYS

CAREERS AND PATHWAYS	• Students of refugee backgrounds often lack the information they require to make informed decisions about subject selection and VCE/VCAL options. • Many students require additional support to navigate career pathways (for example information about pathways in their first language, information about university/TAFE open days, and work experience opportunities). • Students appreciate flexibility from their school when navigating course selection (for example allowing students to 'sit in' on different subjects before they are required to select them, information in their first language, and flexible learning options for senior students). • It is important that careers counsellors are available and welcoming to students.

The students had many reflections about subject selection, careers advice and pathways planning. They spoke about the importance of school staff providing support that is flexible, strengths-based and tailored to the individual student. They wanted their teachers and careers advisers to consider not only their current limitations/barriers but also their future potential.

You're never too old for education. You can go to uni any time you want and learn … you cannot just say 'It's too hard.' … because this is our own future. This is not our teacher's future.

Supporting students with subject selection, particularly during Years 11 and 12, emerged as a key topic across the focus groups. Many participants emphasised the importance of flexibility and informed decision-making.

The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) 'is a senior secondary certificate that provides pathways to tertiary education, advanced certificate courses and the workforce … most students in Victoria receive their VCE when they complete secondary schooling'.[21] Whereas the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a 'hands-on learning' option that provides 'practical work-related experience as well as literacy and numeracy skills'.[22]

VCE and VCAL are usually completed over a two-year period. Some students suggested that schools could provide flexible options, such as allowing students to undertake VCE over three years, or complete a year of VCAL before moving into VCE. A number of students mentioned wanting to try or sit in on subjects before having to enrol in the subject.

They should put all the students in different classes and … experience which class suits me and where I can learn. For example, I go to biology class, I go to maths class or something, and then I choose which ones I like.

The complexities that face school staff when they are advising newly arrived students about subject selection was acknowledged. One participant spoke about feeling frustrated when her teacher told her that she could not choose a VCE subject as it would be too hard. Although the student disagreed, and enrolled in the subject, she shared her reflection that:

They [the teachers] care about you, that's why they are telling you.

[21] Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), *About the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)* https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/wtn/vce/about.aspx (Accessed 23.01.2019)
[22] Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), *About the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)* https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/wtn/vcal/about.aspx (Accessed 23.01.2019)

Students may become frustrated when struggling to understand a very complex system.

I'd been there for only one semester before I had to pick one of them but I started with VCE and I had no idea about the difference between them. So I went to VCE and I didn't know what VCE and VCAL were. I just had to choose one … We were new and it was really hard for us and even now I'm trying to find out my pathways for the future but I'm not really good at that. I haven't picked yet.

Some students were advised to choose VCAL rather than VCE. The students felt that teachers did not believe that they would be capable of meeting the literacy and academic requirements of VCE. Although the students did not dispute that VCE is academically challenging, they expressed frustration that the choice seemed to be made 'for them' and not 'with them'. Those who felt 'pushed' into a pathway expressed feelings of hopelessness and frustration.

You don't want to make someone feel hopeless. You want to explain to them.

Other students posed theories to try to explain why they had been pushed into less academic options. These included teachers having negative past experiences with similar students who had aimed high and not succeeded. They also identified racism leading to low expectations.

I don't know [what] the career person thinks but if they see that you're African … they tell you to do VCAL. It's not up to them though but they tell you. 'VCAL is better for you. VCE is going to be hard.' They shouldn't say that, but they say it. I don't know how they think, whether you're dumb or something. I don't know … They shouldn't say for the students to do VCAL. Obviously it's up to you.

Navigating post-secondary pathways and career decisions emerged as another key area of discussion. The participants highlighted the importance of approachable careers staff; support to find work experience placements; excursions to learn about different careers; providing students with information in their first language; and attending university/TAFE open days. One student reflected that her work experience placement at a hospital was very informative.

I went to the hospital and I met more people from different countries. I love to meet doctors. My parents, they dreaming, 'My daughter, my son should be in the future a doctor', but in our house no one chose to be a doctor because it's really hard. I was trying to do work experience in a hospital to ask more information about doctors and the doctors said, 'It takes a long time to be a doctor, 10 or 20 years.' I said, 'Oh my god.'

One student noted that at her school, the careers adviser is available and welcoming.

In the career office, they can talk, they can go in at recess or lunch and talk to her and the lady is so nice, and she can explain everything.

Other students reflected on negative experiences with careers support.

I think that it's good when you have someone to talk to. Because [the careers advisers] they're always busy with everyone else so they have to do group things.

The opportunity to attend university/TAFE open days was identified as assisting students who are in the process of planning their post-school pathways.

There's an open day and you have to go and ask them. I love it when you're going open day. I went last week and it was good. I asked about more things that I want.

The parents/carers of the students may not be in a strong position to assist them in pathways planning given their own lack of familiarity with study options in Australia.

There's another problem most refugees face. Their parents, they don't have full information of the society. Most of the students who are living here for a long time, their parents, they know how to manage their children's path to lead them to a good way. Those who come from a refugee background, their parents don't have the chance to learn anything and it's very hard for them.

The participants were mindful that they may face barriers to achieving their pathway aims, due to limited English proficiency or lack of familiarity with the course content, and spoke about teachers and family members who supported their aspirations.

Myself, five years ago, I couldn't speak English. If my parents and teachers gave up on me, I wouldn't learn. Because they support me, now I can speak. That's what they need to do, just support. It might take time, but support until she [Layla] gets what she wants, where she wants to be.
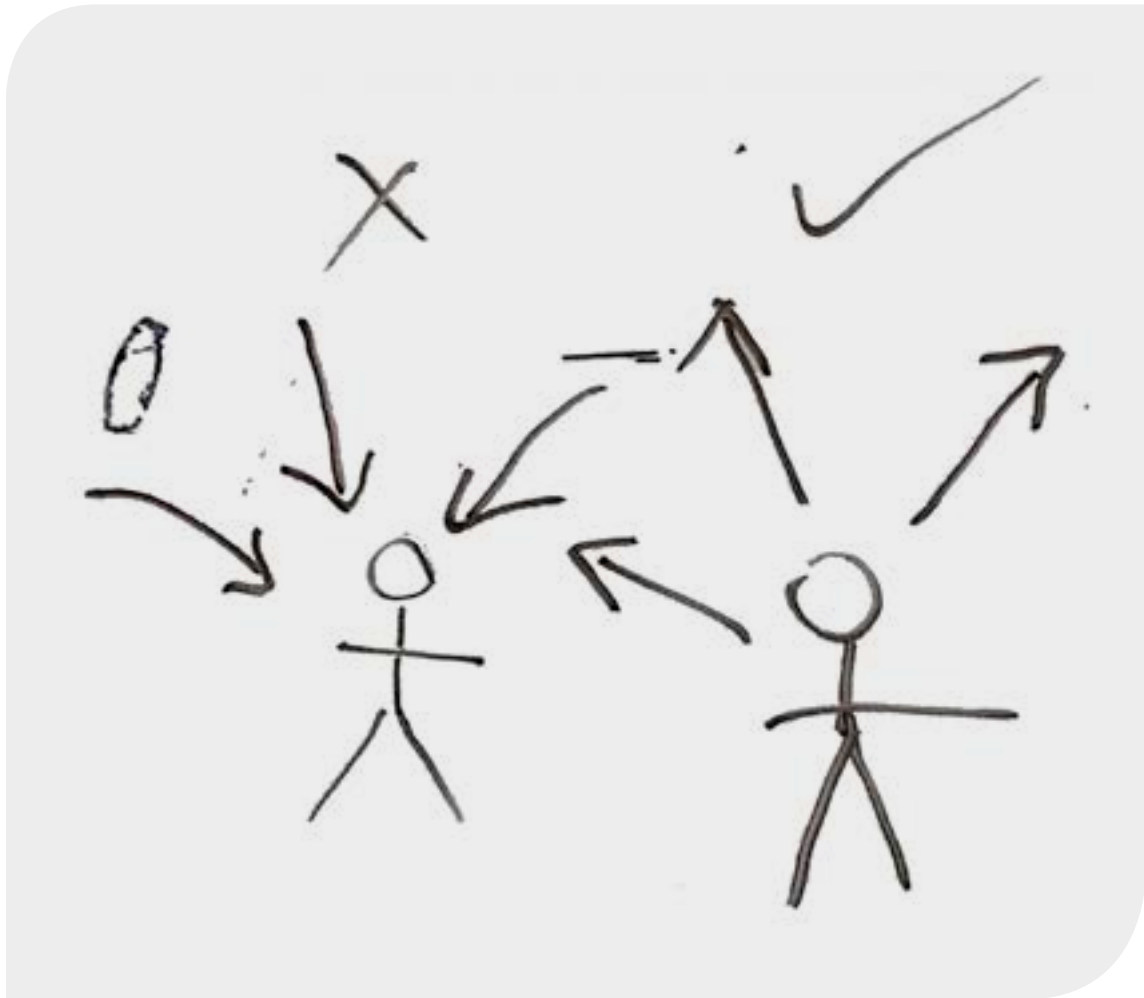
This image was drawn by a participant. The group were discussing barriers and challenges that students of refugee backgrounds experience at school. The student asked to borrow the whiteboard marker and drew this image. The student explained that the arrows represented all the pressure 'coming down' on the students, from school, from home, from everywhere 'more and more'. The student advocated that removing the pressure would help the students.

MULTIPLE PRESSURES AND MENTAL HEALTH

MULTIPLE PRESSURES AND MENTAL HEALTH	• It is important that teachers are aware that students of refugee backgrounds may be experiencing multiple pressures and competing demands, and that this knowledge informs the school's responses to behavioural concerns. • Students benefit when schools acknowledge their strengths, while also supporting them to develop their wellbeing and positive mental health.

A range of challenges were identified that impact on the mental health and wellbeing of students who are newly arrived in Australia. The issues included experiencing multiple pressures, feeling overwhelmed and missing home. When the students reflected on the Jo and Layla case studies, they identified that multiple pressures may impact on their health and wellbeing.

They might have financial pressure, family pressure, language, everything, more and more.

Participants discussed the impact of multiple pressures on mental health and wellbeing. This included pressure from parents regarding academic achievements, financial pressures, pressure to catch up academically with their peers, pressure to complete school work, pressure to make friends and pressure to adapt to a new education system.

If we are under pressure from our family or maybe financial stuff, we cannot find it easy to make friends in school, there is a big gap between you and them.

Most students here which have come from a refugee background, they're ready to have this big jump ahead and all these pressures, it makes them down, weak.

They put pressure – any students doing VCE, they put pressure on them. When they were in Year 9 and Year 10, they don't care about their homework, the teacher doesn't say anything to them. When they get in Year 11, they put pressure suddenly. That's not good for them.

Low proficiency in academic English and feeling behind 'mainstream'/Australian-born peers can have a negative impact on mental health. If these feelings continue over a long period of time, the students might be at risk of disengaging entirely from school.

Maybe he's [Jo] having enough not understanding and he's really tired and very confused.

I think that everything is new for him [Jo] and he has no idea of what to do and stuff, so he gets angry because of the teachers or maybe when the teachers explain to him, still he doesn't get it. That might be a reason, I think.

When a student arrives in Australia, they are required to quickly adapt to a new education system, which can leave them feeling frustrated and overwhelmed.

Maybe Jo is from a very poor and underdeveloped country. Like, he moved into a new country and needs to adapt to new society and how it runs there. It's weird and he might feel fear and doesn't understand, so he kind of just walks out when he's mad.

We think maybe because the system is new for Jo and the education system was different in his own country. Maybe it's just some stress because he has no friends in there and just being alone and sad.

Refugee experiences can have a significant impact on mental health, and students may be deeply affected by the loss of connections to family and community. A number of students suggested that Jo may be missing home, which then impacts on his behaviour in the classroom.

Maybe think he's uncomfortable away from his friends' other country.

Maybe he wants to go back to his old school … in his country

The death of a family member has negative impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of students. The participants proposed that Jo's behaviour may be impacted by grief and loss.

Maybe someone passed away from his family.

One of the reasons … [for] the mental health problem might be the loss of a family member.

A range of strategies can help support mental health and wellbeing. Support from peers, family and school staff can all have a positive impact. When asked what might help Jo, the students in one focus group suggested.

Just to sleep more.

Sleeping is the best.

Parents and families can play an important role in supporting mental health and wellbeing.

The support we need is from our families. Without it, I can't focus my studying. I'll have some mental issue and when I come to school, they put some pressure on me that I have lots of homework and going home, there's no one help me, so I feel bullied and feel like that.

The importance of allowing students to have the space and time to develop and strengthen their own resilience was highlighted.

The students, they have lots of experience, lots of things inside them. They can pull it out. That's enough to lead them to a good path, rather than putting all things from outside world on them … Yeah, giving time to find themselves, their own things.

The participants identified a range of actions students can take that may help to improve their mental health.

If you are struggling with something, you have to tell the teachers. Sometimes, you can tell students also. If I'm doing my subject and they're there, how do the teachers know if he's doing good or bad? I'll tell him that I'm struggling and if he can help me. If I'm sitting quiet for a whole day, maybe the teacher will think he's sick or doesn't want to talk. If the teacher comes to them, maybe the teacher will think he's putting pressure on me. I think sometimes it depends on the teacher as well. They have to talk to them and share their problems.

TRANSITION AND ORIENTATION

TRANSITION AND ORIENTATION	• Newly arrived students of refugee backgrounds often enrol at school mid-term/mid-year and miss out on the transition support that their peers receive when they commence secondary school in Year 7. • Newly arrived students benefit from having a buddy assigned to them. For some students, it is important that this buddy is a same-language peer. • Some students benefit from receiving information about their new school in their first language (for example from an MEA and/or translated written information).

Starting at a new school can be daunting, particularly for students who have a history of disrupted education, or have limited English language skills. Students are required to navigate new systems and spaces, learn about classroom expectations, connect with teachers and establish new peer relationships.

When asked to develop questions for the students at the other schools, the participants were keen to find out more about transition and orientation experiences.

> *How did you feel when you first arrived?*
>
> *Did you have someone to welcome you?*
>
> *Did you welcome other new students?*

The participants reflected on their feelings prior to starting school. They spoke of feeling nervous, alone, scared, anxious and lonely, and shared their desire to fit in and 'make a first good impression'.

One student reflected that on their first day at school they received limited orientation and transition support.

> *On the first day I went to the office and the teacher came. She took me to my class. Done.*

Secondary schools are often confusing physical environments. Students are expected to make their way between classes, often across a large campus. For students with limited prior education experiences, navigating the school space can present a significant challenge.

> *I got lost a lot of times in here … because the first time when you see it, it looks so big and different, but once you're used to it it's easy, you know where to go.*

A number of strategies were identified that may assist students who have recently arrived to feel welcome at their new school. The participants recommended approaches, such as an orientation day, a school tour, support from a bilingual worker/MEA, school signage that uses visuals or is translated, allocating a buddy and linking students with a designated staff-support member.

> *People who are already in the school, the teacher might ask them if they're okay to take the new student around and be his friend for a day. You [pointing at another student in the focus group] helped me the first day.*

Orientation days might include opportunities to learn about school systems and process, IT portals and procedures for absences or late attendance. Orientation can also provide students with the opportunity to build their knowledge of the support staff and systems available at the school, such as school wellbeing or counselling programs.

> *Learn about the school, the classes, teachers … where we're going.*

Having access to the right technology and software can assist students who have recently enrolled at the school.

Make the school give the new students a new device so they can put the timetable on the 'wallpaper'.

The importance of having designated staff members who are responsible for supporting newly arrived students during transition was highlighted.

Helping is having a mentor or a team of people that help the student when they first come, help them with their classes and give them moral support just to give a head start.

There are clearly benefits for students to receive information about their school and curriculum in their first language. Assistance from a MEA or bilingual worker can support newly arrived students as they transition into the school. Providing students with written information translated into their first language was also identified as a useful strategy.

The students noted that it is helpful when teachers introduce newly arrivals to another student who speaks the same first language. The opportunity to speak first language can have a significant impact on students feeling welcome and connected.

When I first came, there was a kid who was there longer and spoke my language, so the teacher told me about him and he started helping me.

Some students suggested that it would be beneficial if teachers advised their classes when a new student had only recently arrived in Australia.

If the class knows, they'll try to give you more help. If they don't know, they probably won't help them. People might bully them and not want to sit next to them, but if you tell them, there might be someone in the class who speaks the same language. That'd be easier and better.

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT WITH FAMILIES

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT WITH FAMILIES	• Students of refugee backgrounds benefit when schools support parents/carers to engage in their children's education (for example by providing qualified interpreters, translated information and organising information sessions).

Families play a key role in supporting students of refugee backgrounds at school. Parents and carers often require additional support to engage in their children's education.

When discussing the case studies, the participants suggested that Jo and Layla may be experiencing issues at home. They noted that many families struggle when they first arrive in Australia, and that this can have a negative impact on a young person's ability to engage and succeed at school.

So, Layla … maybe Jo also have a family problem. Because he [is] very new to Australia, and family also affect with the many problems, because they have to settle and to change their lifestyle. When you have a family problem, this will be another affect to your school.

Family issues … His family might be fighting and when he goes to school he [Jo] gets angry.

Communication was identified as a key barrier for parents/carers to engage with schools. Open, two-way communication strategies are fundamental to building trusting relationships between schools and families.[23] Parents and carers of students of refugee backgrounds often require support from interpreters in order to effectively support their children's education.[24]

My parents want to be very engaged with the school system … my parents will ask what's happening at the school but they can't actually know anything because the language is different. There's a language barrier between the teacher and the parent.

In Victoria, all government schools are able to access interpreting services at no cost, within established guidelines.[25] However, students often act as interpreters for their parents when communicating with teachers, both at their own schools and their siblings' schools.

[When my parents] get to my little brother's school, they'll need either me, my brother or sister or go [with] them. They couldn't just go up to the teacher and ask anything they want.

There are a range of challenges that face students when they act as interpreters for family members. This issue highlights the importance of schools providing professional interpreters when communicating with parents/carers.

I can always translate everything, but there's always some information lost through the process. I can't explain everything perfectly.

23 Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST), (2015). *Schools and families in partnership: a desktop guide to engaging families from refugee backgrounds in their children's learning.*

24 Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST), (2015). *Educating children from refugee backgrounds: a partnership between schools and parents.*

25 Department of Education and Training. *Use an interpreter or translator,* https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/community/Pages/interpreting.aspx.

The participants reflected that their families often struggle to engage with their education. A number of students noted that their parents have very high expectations about their education, and that some students of refugee backgrounds experience significant pressure from their families regarding their performance at school.

Sometimes for me when we do something and I tell my parents, they feel really happy for me but they don't know really how big or small the thing I've done. So they're just happy but they have no idea what it is.

I'm not really sure, but some of the parents … they ignore their children … [they think] that it's simple, going to school … [so the parents] stay at home and they have no idea what's going on at school. They just think that their child is at school, they are studying, but they have no idea how the child is feeling at school. Some parents are different from the other parents.

A range of strategies were proposed that could support parents/carers of refugee background to engage with their children's education. These included providing interpreters (for telephone calls, on-site meetings, parent–teacher interviews and information nights); translating information sheets; and hosting information sessions for parents to increase their knowledge of the Australian education system.

It would be helpful if there were information sessions specifically for [parents] with an interpreter maybe or even sending papers in different languages. That would help.

When asked whether teachers should call home to speak with parents/carers about student behaviour or academic performance, many participants encouraged teachers to first speak privately with the student and then call home.

Some parents from … when they first come to Australia, they're strict about their child's education. I think they [they school] should maybe call in six months because their parents would get angry and they will probably argue with their child and it makes it even worse. Then the child gets a feeling that he hates the school … First, I think the teachers should try to talk to him [Jo] privately.

The parents/carers of students of refugee backgrounds may require additional support to learn and improve their English language skills. Participants suggested that it would be beneficial if schools could provide English classes for parents, or support parents to enrol in English lessons.

It would be good if we could have a language centre, so all the new arrivals, all the different backgrounds they can start English in the same place. So it would be good that we should have a language centre … It's like a centre to practise English so we would have many different levels. It would be for the mums and dads and for the students … They would divide the class into different levels with the mum[s] and dad[s] but it's not combined together. They would have a separate room.

COMMUNITY LINKS

COMMUNITY LINKS	• Students of refugee backgrounds are often unaware of the local community agencies, activities and programs that are available to them. Students benefit when schools provide them with this information.

Schools can play an important role in helping students to build connections beyond the school gates. Community agencies, youth services, sporting clubs and homework clubs all play a key role in supporting the learning and wellbeing of newly arrived students and their families.

Community agencies can assist newly arrived students and their families by providing a range of programs and services, including case management, counselling, emergency relief and social support.

The community service people. Like, they help you when you first arrive.

… the social worker … they know a lot of people are going through this and they have a solution to it. When they look at Jo's side, they're trying to fix it because they understand it. So, they talk to him about their full-on issues, so that helps them as well.

Financial hardship and limited access to transport can impact on the ability of students to participate in outside of school hours programs and establish community links. Participants identified that they would like increased support to access community-based sports programs, such as soccer clubs. For some students it may be challenging to find community groups, programs or activities that they can join.

Until now whenever I have free time and nothing to do. I don't really know what I can do outside. So I know I can go to the shopping centre but it's not really fun. I don't know anything else. It's just difficult to know things if you don't have any resources.

Homework clubs, tutoring programs and libraries can play a role in supporting students of refugee backgrounds to improve their numeracy and literacy skills. When asked what might support Layla, one student suggested:

Maybe she needs to do extra language after school, learning English, tutorial things, like people to help them in the library and stuff to learn English.

Additional community links outside the classroom are important for building skills and confidence.

The more they talk English, the more they know how to speak and the more they will feel confident in the class.

Religious organisations also play a role in providing additional support to students and families who have recently arrived in Australia.

Even when you go to church too and you grow and people will tell you what to do. Like, you can come and friends. They help you sometimes. If you have no parents as well, I just imagine it's an important side, church.

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AND MATERIAL ASSISTANCE

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AND MATERIAL ASSISTANCE	• It is important that schools are aware that some families of refugee background experience financial hardship. Students and families benefit when schools proactively offer support to assist students to access the resources required for learning (such as textbooks, laptops and stationery).

Financial hardship is a key challenge facing many students of refugee backgrounds that can impact on their ability to meet the costs of schooling (for example textbooks, laptops and stationery).

When asked to consider what might be happening in Jo's life that is impacting on his behaviour at school, several participants identified financial hardship as a key factor.

Maybe his [Jo's] family don't have any money because they might be new arrivals, so maybe they don't have enough money.

Students often need support to access the resources they need for school. The students spoke about the negative impact that a lack of educational resources might have on a young person's wellbeing and engagement with school.

If his parents don't have enough money, then he can't get pens and books and if he doesn't have books, he can't do his homework and can't study.

With Jo not having pencils and pens, I was going to say it could be financial or money problems. His parents probably can't afford things like that. Maybe that's why Jo's always mad about it. He can't really deal with it.

Schools can play a role in ensuring that all students have the resources required to learn and participate in class.

In my little brother's primary school, they usually have stationery in the class, just lying around. That would be a nice addition to any classroom.

Another participant noted that he faces additional financial challenges due to his visa status.

One thing I find myself very hard is financial stuff, especially for a few students here. I don't have any support from government, which makes it hard for me to come to school. I need to work, then my language, it doesn't let me … all this makes it very hard.

Covering the costs of public transport was also identified as a challenge facing newly arrived students. In Victoria, many students of refugee backgrounds and their families settle in outer-suburban growth corridors with limited public transport infrastructure.

I think he [Jo] doesn't have the money to pay to catch the bus to come to school. He needs someone to help him pay money.

CONCLUSION

Many students of refugee backgrounds face significant challenges at school. These include: learning English language skills, forming new friendships, and navigating careers and pathways decisions. These experiences can create multiple pressures for students and can impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

The participants in this project identified the important role that teachers and school leaders play in creating an environment where students feel safe and respected. Teachers can assist students to feel a sense of connection and belonging by supporting them to form new friendships and creating opportunities to celebrate diverse cultural identities.

The participants spoke about the importance of teachers providing learning support that is flexible, strengths-based and tailored to the individual student. By giving students of refugee backgrounds the opportunity to make informed decisions regarding their learning, schools can support students to remain engaged in education. By taking a strengths-based approach, schools can provide students with valuable information, and support them in considering their future education and employment pathways.

Teachers and school leaders have a key role to play in creating a school culture that promotes belonging, respect and inclusion for all students. Racism and other forms of discrimination are common experiences for students of refugee backgrounds. When teachers take a proactive approach to addressing these issues, they can ensure that all students feel welcome and included in the school community.

Students of refugee backgrounds have unique skills, strengths and expertise. This report demonstrates the value of engaging students of refugee backgrounds in meaningful consultations. By seeking out the insights of newly arrived students, schools can develop strategies, policies and practices that support all students to reach their potential.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX I

Focus Group Guide – Session 1

The purpose of the focus group will be explained and the fact that it is voluntary to take part and/or answer any questions. We will explain that we will be recording the focus groups to help with the research project.

Thank students for their participants in the research project, and remind them that they can withdraw from the project at any time.

In focus groups we are going to talk about what is helpful and unhelpful for your learning and happiness at school. You might talk about things that happen at school in and outside the classroom.

Q1. Introduction activity: Each participant to say their name; how long they have been at this school; and if they have been to any other school in Australia (and for how long).

Q2. Activity: On a whiteboard, have two columns – one column is a list of things that participants find helpful to learning and wellbeing at school, and the other column for things that participants find unhelpful for learning and wellbeing at school. Explain activity to participants, stating that we would like the list to be as long as possible. Where appropriate, ask participants for examples, or more information.

- Invite participants to give one example for each column (write in appropriate column).
- Ask the group for more examples – until they have exhausted their ideas.

Potential prompts at the end of activity to bring out other areas of interest:

- What was it like when you started at your school? (What was helpful/unhelpful?)
- When you were new, did you know where to go for help if you needed it?
- Are there activities run at lunchtime or afterschool at your school?
- Does your school celebrate cultural diversity/multiculturalism? (for example Harmony Day/ using learning materials that show people from different cultures).
- Do you think there is a problem with racism at your school?
- What's it like having a Multicultural Education Aide (MEA) at your school?
- Does your school help you prepare for when you finish school? (for example work experience, course counselling, career counselling).
- Do your parents/caregivers have much to do with the school? (Do they speak to the school with an interpreter?)
- Do you feel comfortable asking for help at school? Do you know where to get help?
- What do students at school do, if they feel unsafe/concerned/worried about things?

Q3. Activity: Ask each participant to choose three examples from the list under both the helpful and unhelpful columns that they think are the most helpful/unhelpful. Ask participants to put a 'marker' alongside their chosen three for each column.

Follow-up activity:

- Ask participants why they chose the examples they did.
- Ask participants if they agree /disagree with other participants.
- Ask for examples (if they have not already been given).
- Ask participants how these examples are helpful/unhelpful.

Q4. Case Study 1: Jo is new to Australia and has been going to your school for about six months. He is often late and sometimes comes to class without pens and books. He often does not do his homework. When teachers talk to him about these things, he gets angry and sometimes walks out of the classroom.

- What do you think might be going on for Jo?
- What might help Jo at school?

Q5. Case Study 2: Layla can speak two other languages but is new to learning English. She only came to your school last term. Sometimes she doesn't understand what the teacher wants her to do in class. It's often difficult for her to do homework.

- What might help Layla?

Q6. Magic Tool activity: Ask participants 'If you had the power to change one thing in this school, what would it be?' Ask participants to bring this idea to the second focus group.

Q7. Students as experts: Explain to students that we will be speaking to other students at other schools. What should we ask them about?

APPENDIX II

Focus Group Guide – Session 2

Thank students for their participation in the research project, and remind them that they can withdraw from the project at any time.

Activity 1: The project team will develop questions to ask in Focus Group 2 that are based on learning and wellbeing themes that emerge from answers in focus group session 1. Questions will aim to gather additional information, and delve deeper into understanding the identified barriers and facilitators to learning and wellbeing, as identified by the students.

Activity 2: Magic Tool follow-up. Invite participants to share their ideas from the Magic Tool activity in Focus Group 1.

• Ask participants why and how they think these ideas will improve student learning and wellbeing.

Activity 3: Participants will be asked if they would like to present their ideas from Activity 2 to their school and in what type of format. If students express that they would like to voice their ideas to the school, the project team will offer to support students to do this in accordance with school processes and preferences, prior to making this offer to students, the project team will ensure that school leadership staff are willing to receive feedback/ideas from the student group.

APPENDIX III

Staff Interview Guide

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS – SCHOOL STAFF MEMBERS
School policy and practice
How does the school support students of refugee backgrounds when they first arrive in the school?
Partnerships and agencies
Which agencies have a presence in your school? • What sorts of programs/supports do they offer? • To your knowledge, do students of refugee backgrounds access these programs/supports?
School organisation, ethos and environment
How is diversity and multiculturalism celebrated/acknowledged in the school? • Do students have input into this? • Do curriculum resources reflect the school's diversity?
What sort of extracurricular activities are offered to students? • Is there a homework club? • Do you think students of refugee backgrounds attend these activities?
In general, do you think the teachers at this school have an understanding of the sorts of experiences students of refugee backgrounds have had?
How does the school manage challenging behaviour? (This includes disruptive behaviour as well as students who do not complete work/are disorganised/seem disengaged etc.)
What does the school do to create a feeling of safety for students? • How does the school manage racism? • What can students do if they feel unsafe/worried/concerned about things at school or at home? • How does the school encourage students to seek support if they need it?
How is the Multicultural Education Aide (MEA) used at your school?
Do students have the opportunity to give feedback to school staff about their views? (for example how behaviour is managed/how racism is addressed/how diversity is acknowledged, etc.)
Curriculum, teaching and learning
Do you think the teachers at this school have a good understanding of the academic challenges that many students of refugee backgrounds face?
Are refugee-related-issues covered in the curriculum?
How do students at this school find a work experience placement?
How are students counselled to plan for either VCE or VCAL?
Partnerships with parents and carers
How does the school assist parents to understand schooling in Australia?
Do you think that parents of students from refugee backgrounds attend school events? (for example parent/teacher interviews, information nights, sports events, performances, etc.)
Do school staff use interpreters when they speak to parents who need help with English?
How do parents know how to contact the school?
Does the school seek to understand the views of parents/carers of refugee backgrounds? • How does this happen?
Teacher overall perspective: whole school
What do you think your school is doing well to support students of refugee backgrounds? What else do you think the school could do to support students of refugee backgrounds?

APPENDIX IV

Letter for participants – summary of research findings

Thank you for being involved in the 'Student Perspectives Research Project' led by the Foundation House Schools Support Program.

Through this project we had discussions with 51 students, aged 13–19 from three secondary schools. All the students had arrived in Australia in the last seven years, they were from many different countries, they were in an EAL class and they were from a refugee background.

When we met with you, we asked questions about what makes you feel happy and learn in the classroom and at school in Australia. We also asked for your advice about practical strategies that teachers can use to help support students who move to Australia from other countries. You shared lots of great ideas!

We recorded all of the discussions and looked at the information to find the key issues. The key issues focused on making friends, teachers, learning, mental health, careers and family support.

Here are a few quotes from the discussions.

> *I think for people like us when they first come to a new school, a new country, the worst thing is that they feel lonely ... anyone in our position we've lost all our friends so when you first come here you don't know anyone and any activity that gets you to know more people will really help.*

> *You're never too old for an education. You can go to uni any time you want and learn ... you cannot just say, 'it's too hard' ... because this is our own future. This is not our teacher's future.*

> *When you ask the teacher for help, their attitude is good and they will help you but I would prefer if they consider us as adults with broken English, not kids.*

> *I would like to set up a rule ... to make sure that it's a safe place to practise English. Not laughing when you talk when things are wrong.*

We are going to be meeting with teachers from your school to tell them all about the research. We are also going to share the research with other schools that we work with across Victoria.

Your privacy is important to us. We will not put your name on any information that we share.

We would like to thank you again for helping us with this research project!
If you have any questions or you would like more information please contact Jemma: wisemanj@foundationhouse.org.au.

Thank you,

Jemma Wiseman

Schools Support Program – Foundation House