

Chapter 6

The Schooling Experiences of African Youth from Refugee Backgrounds in South Australia: Key Findings and Implications for Educational Practice

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ABSTRACT

African students from refugee backgrounds constitute a special group in Australian schools because of their complex lives and previous schooling and life experiences that are unlike most of their non-refugee peers. This chapter draws upon findings from a collaborative, longitudinal case study that sought to understand the education and career pathways of African students from refugee backgrounds from the perspectives of African youth, educators, service providers, and South Australian African community leaders and elders. Qualitative analysis revealed six key influences that shape these pathways: previous schooling; English language skills; Australian schooling challenges and support; family support, academic achievement; and post-school preparation. This chapter presents the case study of a single student that, although unique in its circumstances, is representative of key findings from the larger study. Implications for educational practice are then described with a view to facilitating educational participation and success amongst this particular group of young people.

INTRODUCTION

Refugees constitute a distinct group of migrants who have complex personal histories typically

involving traumatic circumstances such as witnessing the deaths of loved ones and the destruction of personal property before they leave their homelands. In seeking asylum in another country,

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the refugee journey is often treacherous with persistent, ongoing threats to physical and psychological wellbeing. Each year, a very small proportion (i.e., less than one per cent) of the world's total population of displaced people is granted resettlement in one of a number of countries such as the United States, Canada, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Australia, a culturally and linguistically diverse nation, provides a home to immigrants from all over the world and is one of the top 10 recipient countries for refugees (Refugee Council of Australia, 2006a).

In resettlement countries, participation in, and access to, education and employment are key indicators of social inclusion and integration for refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008; Francis & Cornfoot, 2007b). The transition from secondary school to education and employment for individuals from refugee backgrounds is, therefore, not simply about engaging in study or becoming involved in the workforce but, rather, is symbolic of integration into the mainstream community.

This chapter explores the issues that impact upon the education and career pathways of African youth from refugee backgrounds by drawing upon key findings from recent qualitative longitudinal research. The case study of one African youth participant is presented and the significant influences that shape the education and career pathways of African youth are described. In presenting these findings, this chapter establishes a rationale for providing African youth with additional support in schools and offers recommendations to improve support for these young people in the Australian mainstream school system.

BACKGROUND

Who are Refugees?

In order to qualify as a refugee, an individual must meet a set of criteria as specified in the definition developed during the 1951 Convention Relating

to the Status of Refugees (Neumann, 2004). This definition, established to assist in coping with the population of displaced persons after World War II, stipulates that a refugee is:

... any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country (as cited in Refugee Council of Australia, 2006b).

Globally, there has been an increase in the number of individuals in need of humanitarian assistance (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008). In 2011, the number totalled 42.5 million (UNHCR, 2012), an increase of 9.6 million since 2006 (UNHCR, 2007). According to Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC, 2011), protecting these individuals by offering them resettlement constitutes a major challenge facing the international community.

Australia has an extensive migration history, receiving over 700,000 individuals in need of humanitarian assistance since the Second World War (DIAC, 2011). Australia is considered to take more refugees than any other country relative to its population (Browne, 2006). Between 2003 and 2007, Australia's Offshore Humanitarian Program predominantly provided protection to individuals from Africa (DIAC, 2011), the majority of whom were aged 24 years or younger at the time of arrival (DIAC, 2013). Consistent with these trends are data which suggest that Australian secondary schools receive approximately 3,000 new enrolments of young people from refugee backgrounds each year (West, 2004). These statistics, together with the challenges specific to African youth from refugee backgrounds, resulted in the decision to undertake research with and for this group of young people.

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