

## **Title: Engaging communities -- Refugee students & teacher education in GWS**

Our purpose in this seminar is to ask: What does effective educational program for refugee students look like? And - second, to describe the work being done through our Refugee Action Support program - by the UWS, the ALNF, and by our student teachers and the coordinating teachers in participating high schools.

As a preliminary comment, we need to say (again) that doing this kind of work in the currently resurgent neoliberal environment is akin to swimming upstream. The traction of neo-liberalism has gained is hardly surprising. Most parents and politicians have few doubts about what a 'good' school is and which schools are 'exemplary'. These are schools where students gain the highest NAPLAN scores, outstanding Year 12 results, and admission to the most prestigious University courses. By virtue of their geographical location, or admissions tests, or fees, these schools mostly admit privileged students. They are schools that tend to be strongly shaped by standardised structures and practices, and the institutional formula they offer seems 'evidently' successful. However, as Apple (2002), Teese (2000), Connell, White & Johnson (1991) and others have argued, while such schools offer opportunities for many, their structures and practices are often problematic for disadvantaged students.

A common thread in the literature we refer to here is that mainstream schools reinforce the habitus and capital of our predominantly white, middle-class, English-speaking, heterosexual society. Students located at the 'margins' of this constructed identity are perceived to be the 'minority' students – they are marginalised by social or economic disadvantage, or because they are from 'different' backgrounds and do not possess the cultural and linguistic capital that is expected among children from more privileged families. Schools that serve these students are perceived to be 'problematic' and on the margins. Yet in the Western and South-Western suburbs of Sydney, a region housing almost 10% of Australia's total population, where one third of the population is overseas born, where half the world's languages are spoken, and where approximately 80% of all humanitarian refugees arriving in NSW were settled from 2001-2006 (Community Relations Commission, 2006), such 'marginal' students are in the *majority* and the 'margin' is in fact the 'centre'.

What this means for teachers is that in Western and South-Western Sydney, many of the approaches to 'best practice' prescribed in the Teaching Standards – while they are necessary as a starting point - are quite insufficient to deal with what is needed. This is especially true when one looks at the work professional teachers *should do* and *need to do* with refugee students. This seminar provides analyses and reflections based on work done through the **Refugee Action Support (RAS)** program over the past three years. In RAS, teachers experienced in working with refugee students are the program coordinators in each RAS school, and UWS secondary student teachers are the Tutors. These tutors provide small-group or one-on-one coaching for refugee students, as Loshini and Tania will explain. RAS is a three-way partnership between the NSW DET, the UWS and the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation. The planning for it began in 2006, when Eric contacted me to ask what the University might be able to do, and also started negotiating with the DET. At the same time I gained a grant that allowed me to make contact with leaders in the Sudanese community and they explained to us that support for academic success was their highest priority. Eric will conclude our seminar by talking about the additional training in ESL methods and cultural awareness that he is providing to our students.

As I have already said, and as my colleagues will explain in more detail, *standard* approaches to teaching and pedagogy are quite insufficient and inadequate if the young people you are teaching are recently-arrived refugees. In the next section I will provide information on the background experiences of some of our refugee students and the contexts they have come from, and this will become clearer. In the minds of teachers who are experienced in working with refugee students, there is no doubt about the inadequacy of *standard* approaches to teaching and pedagogy in this context. As one experienced teacher-coordinator said – commenting on the success of RAS as a learning experience for Tutors (as beginning teachers) --

What they thought that a teacher ought to do in a 'normal' teaching situation they now know is going to be completely and absolutely one hundred percent ineffective with these students.

### *Refugees and refugee students – context and background*

Over the past decade substantial numbers of refugees from African countries (including Eritrea, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan) have arrived in Australia on humanitarian visas. Reflecting a re-alignment in the federal government's priorities in relation to the intake of humanitarian refugees, since 2007, a greater proportion of the new arrivals are coming from the Middle East and Asia, including Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). The Australian government provides support for newly arrived humanitarian entrants through its Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS). Services under this program include case coordination, on-arrival reception and assistance, accommodation services, and short term torture and trauma counselling services (Fact Sheet 60, [www.dimia.gov.au](http://www.dimia.gov.au)). The offshore humanitarian visa granted to refugees entitles the holder to permanent residency, onshore family reunification and eventually, citizenship. Refugee students are also entitled to ESL support.

It is important never to generalise across 'refugees' as a category, since each group and even each individual will have distinctly different background experiences. It is better, then, to provide an example which illustrates the backgrounds and experiences of one group – in this case, the Sudanese. Many of the issues they face are shared by other groups of refugees, but the combinations and specifics are rarely the same.

Until late 2006, the Sudanese were the fastest growing immigrant group in Australia. In 2004-2005 Australia took about 70 per cent of its Humanitarian Program immigrants from Africa, and in the past 10 years has granted 14 442 humanitarian visas to Sudanese people. Almost 10 000 of these were granted in 2004-05 (DIMA 2005, p10). It has been estimated that in 2006, there were 4000 Sudanese refugees in Sydney, mostly concentrated in Auburn and Blacktown. After two decades of civil war which has destroyed their infrastructure, many people from southern Sudan have permanently left their home country. Crossing the border to the north, they may enter refugee camps in Egypt, while those who escape to the south may live for five to ten years in large refugee camps in Kenya before being granted visas to enter Australia. Many of the young people in refugee camps have received little schooling. Some teenage refugees arriving in Australia have never been in school, have never sat in a desk, have never held a pencil or a book. Many children have lived through the death of relatives, and have experienced severe brutality.

### *Challenges for schools in teaching refugee students*

Like all immigrant children, refugees face the challenge of learning English. Unlike most other immigrant groups, however, refugees from the Sudan often cannot read and write in their own mother tongue. This, combined with the lack of regular schooling provision in refugee camps, means that most refugees from Africa arrive in Australia without the literacy skills that they need in order to manage the requirements of the standard curriculum. A particularly challenging task is to acquire an understanding of how Australian schools work as social institutions: i.e., how to behave in formal and informal settings, what the rules are, and how to relate to peers and teachers. Some teachers have been thrown for a loop when their very tall 13 or 14 year-old African students run out of the classroom, don't stay in their desks, or don't put up their hands. These taken-for-granted behaviours are thought to be 'natural' – when in fact they are the result of years of discipline and socialisation. If you have never attended school you don't know how to behave like a student.

The Commonwealth government's *New Arrivals Program* is designed to meet the initial needs of immigrant children. Its' prime purpose is to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) support, to enable children to access the curriculum as quickly as possible. Newly arrived students from language backgrounds other than English who meet eligibility criteria are able to access free intensive ESL tuition in a primary school. If they enter a high school, they are entitled to four terms in an Intensive English Centre (IEC). However, as the report of the Community Relations Commission of NSW (2006) noted, "IEC centres are regularly full and unable to take on more students, with alternate arrangements having to be made" (2006, p. 94). The Community Relations Commission has argued that the \$5,039 per student granted by the Australian government for ESL support under the New Arrivals Program is grossly inadequate. It is estimated that to be effective, the financial outlays on ESL programs should be *three times* the amount provided by current federal sources (Community Relations Commission, 2006, p. 94).

Based on what we have observed in RAS schools, and on other research we have done with IEC teachers, it seems that four terms in an IEC is simply not enough to bring some refugee students to the point where they are ready to succeed in a mainstream classroom. However, it seems that at this stage there is no shift in policy on the horizon. As a result, schools and philanthropic organizations are being asked to fill the gap, meeting the immediate needs of refugee students for tutorial support, particularly during the critical months after they have been discharged from an Intensive English Centre and placed in mainstream classes. What we are doing through RAS is providing a service that fits into this category – student teachers gain course credit, and schools and the refugee students gain free tutoring. Our UWS secondary teacher-education students gain a transformational experience – and we are deeply grateful to the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation and the teacher coordinators in the RAS schools for their spectacular contribution.

#### *Questions we address during this seminar*

In the remainder of this seminar, Loshini will describe RAS and how it works, Tania will give an account of the research conducted on RAS and some of the things we have learned from it, and Eric will describe the inter-woven processes of learning English as a second language and learning how to get into the flow of school life in Australia through acculturation into the school as a social setting.

Four questions provide scaffolding for the remaining presentations:

- (1) What kinds of educational provisions might be needed to bring (particular) refugee students from where they are, to where they need to be?

- (2) What additional resources (human and other) do schools need in order to prepare refugee students for success in the mainstream curriculum?
- (3) Bearing in mind the variations in the needs of refugee students, what is the nature of the work that public high school teachers are being called on to do?
- (4) In what ways does the RAS program disrupt the standard processes involved in 'training' beginning teachers? What are the consequences of this disruption?

I would like to conclude with a comment on the challenge we offer here to the neo-liberal formulation -- under which the privileged school is defined as unproblematic --

In such schools, a 'standardised' exemplary teacher who has achieved the competencies listed in the Institute's documentation might be defined as exemplary. What they do works in school settings populated by students whose parents are literate and who have attended school consistently since they were small. However, in the Western and South-Western Sydney schools we are describing here, these standard competencies -- while they may be necessary -- are far from sufficient. In fact they may be "... completely and absolutely one hundred percent ineffective...".

The professional teacher is creative -- and the challenge he or she faces is to discover what *will* work -- what is needed -- for each particular student. Doing this work with refugee students is a task that -- in our opinion - requires the very highest levels of professional teaching ability.

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