

Exploring Educators' Practices for African Students from Refugee Backgrounds in an Australian Regional High School

Jane Wilkinson and
Kiprono Langat
Charles Sturt University

Abstract

Australia's regional refugee resettlement policy has led to increasing numbers of refugees settling in regional areas. This trend has had a major impact upon regions, yet few studies have examined its implications for regional schools. This article reports on findings from focus groups conducted with mainstream and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers at a previously ethnically homogenous regional secondary school, which had experienced a major increase in students of refugee background from a variety of African nations, and in particular, Sudan. Two kinds of analysis are employed in the article. The first identified key themes arising from the focus groups which explored how the school, and in particular, the teachers at classroom level, were responding to and addressing this changing student demographic, both socially and academically. The second analysis employed a theoretical framework that focused on the discursive, material and social preconditions that were enabling and constraining changes to educators' practices in relation to these themes, as they responded to, and addressed this new cohort of students. Four key themes emerged from the focus groups: the role of leadership in fostering a whole school approach to inclusion, teachers' access to ongoing professional development, the increasing diversity of mainstream classrooms, and the major role played by ESL teachers. The paper concludes by suggesting the potential implications of these findings in terms of the preconditions that are necessary in order for regional educators to work productively with African students from refugee backgrounds.

Introduction

A range of Western countries including the USA, Canada, New Zealand, UK and Australia have experienced a major growth since the 1990s in the numbers of children of refugee background¹ from a variety of African

¹ We adopt the definition of a refugee as "someone who has been assessed by a national government or an international agency (such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) and meets the criteria set out under the *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951* (Refugee Convention)" Australian

nations entering schools. A significant contrast between these students and earlier refugee movements is that the former group of students and their families possess levels of education, vocational skills and financial resources considerably lower than the educated and more financially well off “anticipatory” groups of refugees that Western schooling systems traditionally have received.² This key shift in student demographic has heralded a “new and complex set of issues” for education systems, classroom teachers’ practices and teacher education at both pre-service and continuing levels which teacher educators, practitioners, policymakers and researchers in the past few years are beginning to “understand and respond to”.³

Traditionally immigration in Australia has occurred in capital cities and a handful of provincial centres, with regional and rural Australia remaining relatively culturally homogenous.⁴ However, declining populations, labour market shortages and concentrations of immigration in urban centres⁵ led to a federal government policy shift in which it was determined that up to 45 per cent of refugees should settle in regional locations.⁶ As a result of this changed policy, between 2003 and 2011, humanitarian entrants from a variety of African nations were settled in significant numbers in regional areas. In New South Wales, the state in which our study is located, the figures for primary settlement of African origin refugees in regional centres include: 227 in Wagga Wagga; 546 in Newcastle; 336 in Wollongong and its surrounds, and 396 in Coffs

Human Rights Commission, “Face the Facts,” www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/face.../FTF_2008_Web.doc, (accessed 20 January 2011): 50 .

² J. Lynn McBrien, “Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States: A Review of the Literature,” *Review of Educational Research* 75: 3 (2005): 334.

³ Jill Brown, Jenny Miller and Jane Mitchell, “Interrupted Schooling and the Acquisition of Literacy: Experiences of Sudanese Refugees in Victorian Secondary Schools,” *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 29: 2 (2006): 151.

⁴ Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Shepparton Regional Humanitarian Settlement Pilot: Summary report of an evaluation undertaken by Margaret Piper and Associates for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship,” www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivery-assistance/governmentprograms/settlement-planning/-pdf/Shepparton_pilot.pdf, March 2007 (accessed 30 January 2011).

⁵ Institute for Community Ethnicity and Policy Initiatives, *Cultural Diversity and Economic Development in Four Regional Australian Communities* (Melbourne, Victoria: Department of Transport and Regional Services).

⁶ Glenn Withers and Marion Powall, *Immigration and the Regions: Taking Regional Australia Seriously: A Report on Options for Enhancing Immigration's Contribution to Regional Australia* (Canberra: Chifley Research Centre, 2003).

Harbour.⁷ In terms of Sudanese-born people (the group which were predominantly represented amongst the students in our case study school) the 2006 census recorded 19,050 Sudan-born people in Australia, an increase of 287.7 per cent from the 2001 census.⁸

In relation to this changing demographic, an emerging body of research is examining the implications for educators' practices in previously more mono-cultural locations.⁹ Recent studies of educators' practices in regional and rural locations suggest the need for culturally responsive teacher education and preparation may be even greater, given educators' limited access to specialised educational support and services.¹⁰ This article contributes to the literature by reporting on findings from three teacher focus groups conducted as part of a case study of a previously ethnically homogenous regional secondary school. The school had experienced a major increase in students of refugee background from a variety of African nations, and in particular, from Sudan. The article represents an endeavour to situate the experiences of this group of regional teachers working with resettled African regional secondary students within the "broader context of engagement" that is occurring between Africa and increasingly, regional Australia.¹¹

In the following sections of the article, we examine the literature on educators working with refugee students from a variety of African nations, outline the study, its methodology and theoretical lens. We then

⁷ Department of Immigration and Citizenship, "Community Information Summary, 2011" <http://www.immi.gov.au/settlement/> (accessed September 4, 2012).

⁸ Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011. Note this is not a representative number, as many ethnic Sudanese were born outside of Sudan.

⁹ For example Elizabeth Cassity and Greg Gow, "Making Up for Lost Time: The Experiences of Southern Sudanese Young Refugees in High School – Programs and Practice," *Youth Studies Australia* 24: 3 (2005): 51-55; Brooke McDonald, Sandy Gifford, Kim Webster, John Wiseman, and Sue Casey, *Refugee Resettlement in Regional and Rural Victoria: Impacts and Policy Issues* http://mccaugheycentre.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0018/135252/RefugeeResettlementReport_Mar08.pdf (VicHealth, March 2008) (accessed 21 January 2011).

¹⁰ Kathryn Edgeworth, *Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion: Ethnic Minority, Muslim and Refugee Students in Rural Schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) (Bathurst: Charles Sturt University, 2012); Jane Wilkinson and Kiprono Langat, "We have to give these people a break," paper presented in 'Education for all in the light of social justice' symposium at Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference, University of Melbourne, 28 November - 2 December 2010.

¹¹ Mike Oliver, "Standing Up, Reaching Out and Letting Go: Experiences of Resilience and School Engagement for African High Schoolers from Refugee Backgrounds," *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 33: 1 (2012): 151-164.

map the key themes which emerged from focus groups conducted with mainstream and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, which explored how the school, and in particular, the teachers at classroom level, were responding to and addressing this changing student demographic, socially and academically. As part of this mapping, we explore the discursive, material and social preconditions that emerged through teachers' reports, as enabling and constraining shifts to educators' practices in relation to these themes, as they responded to, and addressed this new cohort of students. The article concludes by suggesting some potential implications of these findings in terms of the preconditions that may be necessary in order for regional educators to work productively with African students from refugee backgrounds.

Examining the literature: Educators working with African students from refugee backgrounds

Recently, there has been a burgeoning of research examining educational issues for educators working with refugee origin students from various African nations, including Sudan.¹² At the policy level, however, a 'piecemeal' approach has characterised refugee education in which students' needs have been conflated with other immigrant students.¹³ In secondary schools, teachers must balance demands to develop higher order cognitive understandings of specialist subject areas such as science, while simultaneously students are acquiring fundamental skills in reading and writing.¹⁴ Studies across a range of nations report that the ongoing intensive language support required for students to achieve desired levels of academic proficiency is frequently lacking or manifestly inadequate.¹⁵ Compounding this lack of support, mainstream secondary classroom teachers frequently do not view the teaching of language and literacy in their specialist areas as part of their responsibility.¹⁶ This is seen as part

¹² For example, Karen Dooley, "Re-thinking Pedagogy for Middle School Students with Little, No or Severely Interrupted Schooling," *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 8: 1 (2009): 5-22; Tania Ferfolja, Margaret Vickers, Florence McCarthy, Loshini Naidoo and Eric Brace, *Crossing Borders: African Refugees, Teachers and Schools* (Deakin West, ACT: Australian Curriculum Studies Association Inc., 2011); Anne Harris, "Neir Riel (Strong Girls): Transgression and Fugitive Spaces in Sudanese Australian Classrooms," *Qualitative Inquiry* 20:10(2011):1-10; Oliver, 2012.

¹³ Julie Matthews, "Schooling and Settlement: Refugee Education in Australia," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 18: 1 (2008): 32.

¹⁴ Dooley, 2009.

¹⁵ McBrien, 2005; Ruth Whiteman, "Welcoming the Stranger: A Qualitative Analysis of Teachers' Views Regarding the Integration of Refugee Pupils into Schools in Newcastle upon Tyne," *Educational Studies* 31: 4 (2005): 375-391.

¹⁶ Dooley, 2009.

of the English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' purview.¹⁷ ESL teachers have traditionally worked with learners who bring literacy in their first language and experiences of formal schooling. They struggle with the differing pedagogical, curricular and assessment demands presented by students who come from highly oral, non-literate cultures.¹⁸

There are a number of material preconditions which shape regional educators' practices when working with students from a variety of African nations. These include educators' minimal experience of cultural heterogeneity;¹⁹ lack of expertise necessary for successful learning and teaching of refugee students with disrupted schooling from a variety of African nations; and lack of access to intensive English facilities, appropriate policies and broader public infrastructure.²⁰ These were some of the mediating preconditions which framed educators' practices as they worked with African students of refugee background in the regional high school in which our research was undertaken. We now sketch the background to the study and outline its methodology.

Regional High School Study: Background and Methodology

The major aim of the study from which this article draws was to document the implications for leadership and pedagogical practices as a previously largely mono cultural, government regional high school, shifted to an increasingly ethnically diverse student demographic, characterised by an increase in refugee students, with interrupted schooling, from a range of African nations. In 2009 – the time of the study – approximately 5 per cent of Regional High School's students²¹ were from Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE).²² The majority of these students were from Sudan as the regional centre in which the school was located had been designated as a preferred resettlement area for Sudanese refugees. However, the school also welcomed small numbers of students from other African nations such as the Congo, Burundi and Sierra Leone.

Five per cent of LBOTE students in no way equates to the linguistic and ethnic diversity of many urban based schools in Australia. However, it

¹⁷ Matthews, 2008.

¹⁸ Matthews, 2008.

¹⁹ Fred Yeo, "The Barriers of Diversity: Multicultural Education and Rural Schools," *Multicultural Education* 7: 1 (1999): 2-7.

²⁰ Edgeworth, 2012; Wilkinson and Langat, 2010.

²¹ A pseudonym for the school has been adopted in this article.

²² Regional High School Student Information Booklet, 2009

represented a significant increase for the school, particularly as these were students who were “notably more ‘visible,’”²³ both in terms of their non-Anglo-European ancestry and low likelihood of speaking English as a first language. Despite its designation as a preferred resettlement area for humanitarian settlers, the region did not have a new arrivals program in which students could gain fulltime ESL tuition, as according to state-wide policy, the numbers of students precluded its establishment. Hence, prior to 2008, when an intensive English class finally was established at the school due to increased numbers of students, the school was forced to place African students from refugee backgrounds, with interrupted schooling, low levels of literacy, and frequently speaking no English, into mainstream classes with very limited ESL specialist support for students and limited professional development for teachers.

The case study employed audio-taped, semi-structured interviews and focus groups as its primary method of data collection. Interviews were conducted with executive staff, head teachers of Maths and English, Learning Support Officers – Ethnic (LSOs) and the careers counsellor. Focus groups were held respectively with English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, mainstream teachers, counsellors, students of mainly Anglo Australian background, and two focus groups with students of refugee background from predominantly Sudan, but also Sierra Leone, Burundi and the Congo. This article draws on data collected from three teacher focus groups which were held from September - November 2009 – two mainstream teachers groups and an ESL teachers’ focus group. The aim of the focus groups was to explore whether their classroom practices had changed as a result of the arrival of this new demographic and if so, how. We also wished to examine the kinds of *preconditions* for their practice, which may have been constraining and/or enabling changes to their pedagogy. We selected these groups for analysis however, as what emerged from their reports was a picture of how the school was socially and academically addressing this rapid shift in demographic, as well as how teachers were responding at classroom level. Hence, it is the themes from this emerging picture that this article focuses on.

The first two focus groups consisted of six mainstream teachers – four women and two men – representing a range of specialist subject areas including: Art, English, History, Science, Maths, Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) and Technology and Applied Studies (TAS). The teachers had between five to twenty years of

²³ Oliver, 2012, 152.

experience of teaching predominantly in regional and rural schools. The teachers were nominated by the executive team on the basis that they represented the main teaching disciplines in the school and were deemed as the most experienced and effective teachers when it came to working with African students of refugee background. A third focus group was held with three female ESL teachers who worked with the students to support them both in mainstream classroom settings and in an intensive English class that had been set up by the school executive in 2008 – the year prior to the study. All had had at least five years' experience as ESL teachers. The group were asked similar questions to the mainstream teachers, with an additional category exploring the ESL program and practices at the school. The first layer of analysis – mapping of the themes – utilised the NVIVO software package for the purposes of coding, categorising and linking ideas, and accurately annotating each transcript.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for the second layer of analysis was practice architectures. Practice architectures are the “characteristic arrangements associated with practices of different kinds.”²⁴ These architectures do not *predetermine* teachers' pedagogical practices but are the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social political arrangements, i.e., the mediating *preconditions*, which shape how these practices unfold.

Kemmis and Grootenboer²⁵ have proposed that practices are composed of sayings, doings and relatings which occur “amid arrangements of entities in three kinds of intersubjective spaces ... semantic ... physical ... and social.”²⁶ For example, the ESL focus group reported that they spent a good deal of time teaching many of the African students of refugee origin how to engage in (commonly taken-for-granted) practices of Australian schooling, such as getting one's books out at the start of a lesson. This practice is underpinned by a set of cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political mediating preconditions which shape how the

²⁴ Brian Hemmings, Stephen Kemmis and Andrea Reupert, “Practice Architectures of University Inclusive Education Teaching in Australia,” *Professional Development in Education* (forthcoming).

²⁵ Stephen Kemmis and Peter Grootenboer, “Situating Praxis in Practice: Practice Architectures and the Cultural, Social and Material Conditions of Practice,” in *Enabling Praxis: Challenges for Education*, ed. Stephen Kemmis and Tracey Smith (Rotterdam: Sense Publishing, 2008), 37-64.

²⁶ Brian Hemmings, Stephen Kemmis and Andrea Reupert, forthcoming.

practices associated with ‘doing literacy’ unfold in many Australian secondary classrooms. The *sayings* associated with the practice include the idea and related understanding that getting one’s books out is a precursor to formal written work; the *doings* include the physical actions of getting out one’s book; and the *relatings* suggest the interactions between teacher and student, in which students are positioned as formal learners in relation to the teacher as pedagogue.

Hence, we use the framework of practice architectures to draw attention to what were *enabling* and *constraining* shifts to educators’ practices as the school and teachers engaged with how to work socially and academically with African students from refugee backgrounds. In so doing, we render visible how practices (and changes to educators’ practices in particular) are enabled and constrained not only by the practice knowledge of *individual* educators, but also by the broader practice conditions in which they work.²⁷ In turn, this has the potential to shed light on how productive changes to educational practices can be enabled.

Four themes from the focus groups emerged in relation to how the overall school, and teachers at classroom level in particular, were responding to and addressing this changing student demographic, and the preconditions that were enabling and constraining shifts in educators’ practices in relation to these themes. They were: the role of leadership in fostering a whole school approach to inclusion; access to appropriate professional development; the increasing diversity of learners in mainstream classrooms; and the enhanced role of ESL teachers.

Changing educators’ practices: Mapping the constraints and enablers for change

(1) The role of leadership in fostering a whole school approach to inclusion

When asked to describe the school in which they worked, the three focus groups reported on a range of practices operating at a whole school level, which they claimed had positively influenced students and teachers’ attitudes and practices towards African students from refugee backgrounds. At the cultural-discursive level, a range of sayings such as

²⁷ Kemmis, Stephen, Christine Edwards-Groves, Ian Hardy, Jane Wilkinson, and Annemaree Lloyd “Ecologies of Practices: Learning Practices,” in *Learning Practice*, ed. Paul Hager, Alison Lee, and Ann Reich, *Learning Practice* (Dordrecht: Springer), 33-49.

‘comprehensive,’ ‘inclusive,’ ‘diversity,’ ‘tolerance,’ and ‘acceptance,’ were repeatedly employed by teachers to describe the social environment of the school. In particular, they identified the practices of executive leadership as critical in fostering and enabling the discursive, material and social conditions by which a whole school inclusive environment was re-negotiated and shaped, as increasing numbers of students from African refugee backgrounds with high literacy and learning needs arrived.

Two examples in particular were noted by the three groups. At the social level, ESL staff held a barbecue in which students were asked to bring a friend from the dominant Anglo Saxon culture in order to foster greater integration between the refugee background students and the dominant ethnic majority. ESL teachers developed a unit of work with students around how to engage in conversation in social situations. Students designed and sent appropriate invitations. Tangible support from the executive leadership was reported by ESL staff as critical in shifting the relationships between executive staff and the students and thence in turn, other staff such as teachers and majority ethnic students. The principal and deputy principal hosted the barbecue, cooked the food and mixed with the students and their families. As the ESL teachers noted:

the kids were astonished that ... (Principal) ... and ... (Deputy Principal) ... came down and served the sausages, they were just astounded that the leader would be serving, little things in some ways but that spoke enormously to kids that they were valued, important and that someone in that position would actually serve sausages.

As one ESL teacher observed, this action was not a ‘one-off’ event but indicative of a deeper set of relationships between the executive leadership and students in which the underlying message was, “it’s not an us and them and it must be your problem ... that whole modelling from the top – it’s right through that it’s modelled.”

At the academic level, in 2008, the year prior to the study, an executive leadership initiative in consultation with the wider education district encouraged all African students of refugee origin to be enrolled at the school, in order to gain the critical mass of students required to run an intensive English class. As a result, the school was able for the first time to employ a full time ESL teacher, supported by two part-time ESL teachers. The creation of the class meant the previous ‘band aid’ practice of placing African students of refugee origin into mainstream classes with limited ESL support could be disbanded. The ESL teachers described

this important shift and noted its impact in transforming mainstream teachers' perceptions of this new group of learners:

Staff have ... see(n) ... it as being a positive thing ... when we got the intensive class the change in the kids who were in that was just so, so obvious and clear to everyone that people were just astounded and they could see the improvement, even ... (when the students) ... are in mainstream classes. They could see how much more settled they were and relaxing and language improving. Of course they were getting so much just English ...

The focus groups identified a series of key discursive, material and social preconditions or shifts in the arrangements of practices at the school, which, according to them, had shaped an environment of inclusion for African students of refugee origin. They identified a range of *discourses* at executive level which positioned the diversity of learners and embrace of this diversity as an asset for the school. They noted how leadership's strategic change to the material conditions for students' learning (through the establishment of the intensive English class) had had positive flow-on effects for learners and teachers alike. The teachers' accounts also draw attention to the *relational* aspect of these practices, i.e., executive staff modelling reaching out and valuing of African students of refugee origin. Thus far Regional High School's practices at whole school level appear to encompass a set of 'holistic approaches' to refugee education, which "pay attention to school ethos, welcoming environments ... pastoral care, ESL and English language support, racism and xenophobia and first language support."²⁸ Such approaches have been shown to be "critically important to settlement" for they reduce students of refugee origin's "vulnerability and build resilience."²⁹

At the classroom level, mainstream teachers identified three aspects of the conditions shaping their classroom practices which were enabling and/or constraining changes to their educational practices. These were access to professional development; the increasingly diverse spectrum of learners in their classrooms; and the role of the ESL teachers in their regional high school.

(2) *Access to professional development*

A predominant thread running through the two mainstream teachers' focus groups was the need to access professional development (PD) that

²⁸ Matthews, 2008, 40.

²⁹ Matthews, 2008, 40.

was appropriate and responsive to the changed practice conditions which they were encountering as regional secondary teachers. In contrast, ESL teachers noted that access to ongoing professional development was supported by a range of structures, including a regional network, an ESL teacher mentor, and some support to access training in Sydney and their regional centre.

In discussing this issue, mainstream teachers sketched the kinds of PD that would be useful for them. An important component, they argued, included raising their own awareness of the various cultures and languages of students from diverse African countries. It also included pedagogical strategies that would support learners' academic progress, and guidance as to when and how to foster inclusive social classroom environments, without 'forcing' students to integrate for the sake of it. The following quotations were illustrative of the tenor of these discussions. For instance, in relation to the provision of appropriate PD, one teacher noted:

And I think that's perhaps something that we need more professional development ... because suddenly we are a school, a population of ... (X students) ... with this diversity but not necessarily given ... enough strategies to make sure that we are catering for the needs.

A second teacher commented in terms of awareness-raising:

I guess we're the ones that remain ignorant because we're, and it's a terrible ignorance ... okay you're coming into our country but we're not, we don't really know anything about where you've come from or, and yes, I think maybe if we did learn a little bit more about, you know how many languages they speak, what their cultural beliefs, maybe they'd be increasing understanding at least.

This is not to say that teachers had not gained any PD. Both groups recounted instances in which information had been given at staff meetings. Although useful in raising awareness, the teachers noted that this fell short of ongoing professional development tailored specifically to their needs:

F: Yes, there was another staff meeting wasn't there where they would talk about various students and that whole thing about languages, but maybe it's not done often enough, especially when you get like casuals coming in and things like that as well ...

M: I mean in my area, I mean we're teaching to a syllabus where it's not just English that they have to learn, it's also another language which is Science, is sort of on top of that...

When working with students from African refugee origin, teachers play a crucial role by rejecting 'deficit' models of students and their families, through a belief that they can make a difference, and in the quality of their pedagogies.³⁰ However, to achieve this end, they require professional development which fosters the necessary conditions conducive to transformations in their teaching at the cultural-discursive level (e.g., developing greater understandings about diverse African students' language and cultural beliefs); at the material-economic level (e.g., strategies to support teachers in catering for African students' specific needs such as language and literacy training); and at the social-political level (e.g., working sensitively and reflexively with all students in terms of fostering integration). The teachers' comments also suggest that providing them with the training to gain the skills to assist learners to develop their reading and writing within their content area may be a critical but not sufficient aspect of changing their pedagogy. This is because such training may neglect the cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements which hold particular pedagogical practices in place, and which also need to be changed, in order to support such transformations. In the next section, we explore a further and connected element of the preconditions shaping classroom practices, when it came to working with African students of refugee origin.

(3) Increasing diversity of learners in secondary mainstream classrooms

Mainstream teachers identified that along with catering for African students of refugee origin, there were increasing numbers of learners in their classrooms overall, with complex academic and social needs. For a number of teachers, this was a challenge to their practices for which their training had not prepared them. One teacher reflected:

And in some classes you've got a real mix, you've got students with attitude and behavioural problems, ESL students, you've got students with learning difficulties, you've got students who've got disabilities, physical or mental and so forth. And for today's lesson we're going to mould it all from all these different things, it's quite difficult.

³⁰ Bob Lingard, Debra Hayes, Martin Mills, and Pam Christie. *Leading Learning: Making Hope Practical in Schools*. Maidenhead, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003.

A second mainstream teacher summed up the kinds of pressures on teachers as they attempted to cater for an increasing diversity of learners, particularly in the years prior to an ESL intensive English class being established:

I just reckon it puts a lot of pressure ... about three years ago, I had a year eight class and I had about six Sudanese in there but I also heard about six major learning difficulties and ... I couldn't get anything done. I felt bad for the kids who knew how to read and write because you just spent so much time just with the basics and there was no support and I just thought that was ridiculous. That was allegedly a mainstream class.

Rather than these sayings being constructed as suggesting resistance from mainstream teaching staff – an attitude which has been identified as forming a major obstacle to the successful integration of refugee students³¹ – the mainstream teachers expressed a willingness to learn. However, the preceding quotations highlight the prevailing material-economic dimensions which frame these secondary teachers' classroom practices when working with African students of refugee origin. Lack of training and lack of access to additional support were constraining teachers' doings, when it came to providing differentiated classroom instruction for highly diverse classrooms.

While acknowledging the increasing diversity of learners in their classrooms, a handful of teachers' sayings focused on how they had used these conditions to enable productive changes to their practices. Teachers provided some examples of how they had attempted to foster "pedagogies of engagement"³² by building upon student strengths and making links between students' out-of-school knowledge and classroom activities. A teacher observed:

We were talking about self and identity and I tried to encourage three of the girls to bring in some of the beautiful fabrics from home ... and I said, "How about you bring some of those in?" ... And then one of the European girls said, "Can I wear that too?" So they dressed up and took photographs of her, so that was good.

The first three themes identified by the focus groups when working with African students of refugee origin are not peculiar to Regional High

³¹ Kathryn McKenzie and James Scheurich, "Teacher Resistance to Improvement of Schools with Diverse Students," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 11: 2 (2008), 117-133.

³² Matthews, 2007.

School's geographical location. Leadership practices, access to professional development appropriate to secondary teachers' needs, and the challenges and opportunities of increasingly diverse mainstream classes, are part of the gamut of practice conditions encountered in urban secondary settings, as well as at Regional High School. However, the role ESL teachers played at the school appeared to be a significant enabling precondition which all focus groups noted was crucial in supporting both African learners and mainstream teachers' practices.

(4) *Enhanced role of ESL teachers at Regional High School*

Research suggests that teachers in urban and regional locales share issues in common in regard to under-resourcing and a sense of ill preparedness when working with African students of refugee origin. However, one area in which there may be a difference between the research noted in urban locales and Regional High School was the significance of the role played by ESL staff in relation to mainstream teachers, as well as students of refugee origin. The establishment of the intensive English class meant that ESL teachers were able to focus in an ongoing and holistic fashion on the development of students' critical language, literacy, and numeracy skills. Simultaneously, however, the ESL teachers tackled basic practices associated with 'doing' school. This was of particular note, given that the explicit teaching of these practices has been reported as often absent in Australian secondary schools.³³ As one ESL teacher described:

[W]e tried to do a lot on patterning of behaviour about coming in and unpacking, always ruling a margin ... put your bag down and the sort of routines that kids coming through an Australian school system have had probably since pre-school ... length of times in concentration and a written culture ... we got them diaries, we tried to be very consistent ... they couldn't believe that you'd have all these books but a folder that when they completed ... they filed work. There was a lot of that patterning to underpin so that made the kids a lot more settled.

ESL teachers appeared to be taking on the role of cultural mediators, critical for refugee students' integration.³⁴ This role extended to sport, so necessary in Australian regions for students to build access and participation in civil society. For example, a mainstream teacher observed that the ESL staff "will pick the girls up and take them to the

³³ Annette Woods, "Learning to be Literate: Issues of Pedagogy for Recently Arrived Refugee Youth in Australia *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 6:1-2(2009), 81-101.

³⁴ Eliza Major, "Secondary Teachers as Cultural Mediators for Language Minority Students," *The Clearing House* (September/October 2006): 29-32.

sport because otherwise the girls won't go. The girls love sport ... you know it's that sort of extra step ... that extra mile you have to walk."

ESL staff was able to do so because living in a regional town meant that they had established relations with families beyond the school gate, via a variety of formal and informal community encounters. As the ESL teachers commented:

You will see out of hours many of the families of the students that you teach and it's such a benefit when you feel comfortable going and talking to them in the supermarket ...

The ESL teacher can be interpreter after hours; they might be the car ride to the subject selection night. We might be taking them to church ... I guess our job's not really Monday to Friday 9 till 3.30...

Mainstream teachers indicated a willingness to accept de facto professional development from ESL teachers in the absence of other forms of professional development support. The following comment typified this practice:

I might say to ... (the ESL teacher) ... I want to do this ... what's the best way to approach this ... I've worked out what the weaknesses are ... we're going into the computer room and I've written very explicit ... instructions how to do these certain things and with both of us there ... (ESL and mainstream teacher) ... hopefully we can try and get them to achieve things or you give them things to model off.

Discussion

In this final section, we examine some potential implications of these findings. In so doing, we note this is a small ethnographic study and so we posit these implications as suggestive. There was evidence that Regional High School's leadership had modelled a "caring approach through a focus on possibilities and respect, not on deficits" at the level of social inclusion. These practices are 'crucial' in working to achieve 'democratic schooling' for students.³⁵ However, there appeared to be two critical gaps in this approach.

³⁵ Gunn Vedoy and Jorunn Moller, "Successful School Leadership for Diversity? Examining Two Contrasting Examples of Working for Democracy in Norway," *International Studies in Educational Administration* 35: 3 (2007): 58-66.

Firstly, mainstream teachers' identification of their limited access to professional development, and the interconnected theme of working with increasingly diverse learners in their classrooms, suggests the need for school executive teams to foster conditions for *pedagogical* leadership at the whole school level via a "coordinated teaching and learning system."³⁶ Such an approach would include a focus on the institution as 'capabilities-orientated,' rather than orientated towards lack and deficit. One way in which a capabilities-orientated approach could be nurtured is through utilising the expertise of ESL teachers at the school. Teachers reported they were paramount in providing students with crucially needed basic print literacy (as opposed to language acquisition), filling the gaps of other school-based content and acting as cultural mediators between the students, the school and the home.³⁷ Their role could be expanded to encompass a wider school approach to inclusive education. For example, a major recommendation of a good practice guide to supporting education of refugee children is that ESL teachers work collaboratively with classroom teachers to plan lessons and teaching materials.³⁸ In secondary schools, this could entail the ESL teacher working with disciplinary/cross disciplinary based teams when planning units of work, rather than the current more ad hoc measures which appeared to characterise Regional High School's approaches to refugee education support. It would include ESL teachers teaching mainstream classrooms to model specific strategies, as well as working with teachers in discipline or cross disciplinary teams to model and share concrete examples of effective practice and units of work. This is where a regional location can be an asset as ESL teachers' expertise was valued very highly by teachers in a region where such expertise was thin on the ground.

Secondly, the practices of professional development for secondary educators need to go beyond the material level. Regional High School's attempts to address their rapidly changing demographic, raises a broader social justice issue of the potential need for adequate training for regional educators, when catering for refugee students who do not 'fit' a Eurocentric Western learner norm of immersion in "continuous, print-

³⁶ Tania Ferfolja and Loshini Naidoo, *Supporting Refugee Students through the Refugee Action Support (RAS) Program: What Works in Schools* (University of Western Sydney, 2010).

³⁷ Dooley, 2009.

³⁸ Department for Education and Skills [DfES], *Aiming High: Guidance on Supporting the Education of Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children*. DfES/0287/2004, http://repository.forcedmigration.org/show_metadata.jsp?pid=fmo:3656 (accessed 10 July 2011).

based text.”³⁹ They signal that changing practices requires challenging the discourses which frame the norm of the print-immersed student in high schools;⁴⁰ the system of activities through which teachers construct mainstream education (for example, activities based on the conception of a normal student which the increasingly diverse classrooms of Regional High School are challenging); and the patterns of relationships in which African students of refugee origin may be pedagogically framed as lacking and thus in need of remediation. It suggests the need for a recognitive justice approach, which sees “resources for learning in all students ... rather than differences as problems to be overcome.”⁴¹

Conclusion

Changes in educators’ practices require changing not simply the practice knowledge of *individual* educators such as those at Regional High School, but the practice architectures or cultural-discursive, material-economic and social conditions and arrangements that hold these practices in place.⁴² The increasing diversity of mainstream classrooms and the very limited access to ongoing professional development tailored to teachers’ needs implies a potential gap between policy expectations of regional refugee resettlement on the one hand; and the necessary conditions to enable enhanced teaching and learning for young African learners of refugee origin, on the other hand. It highlights a potential issue of social justice, i.e., that in order for schools such as Regional High School to make a difference in the lives of this new demographic, they may be forced to do so in conditions that are not entirely of their own making. It suggests the need for further research to examine the *educational* implications for educators, schools and African students of refugee origin in terms of regional resettlement policies.

³⁹ Woods, 2009, 89.

⁴⁰ Woods, 2009.

⁴¹ Villegas and Lucas, 2002, as cited in Carmen Mills, “Making a Difference: Moving Beyond the Superficial Treatment of Diversity,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 36: 4 (2008): 270.

⁴² Kemmis, Stephen, Christine Edwards-Groves, Ian Hardy, Jane Wilkinson and Annemaree Lloyd 2012.

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