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Improving Educational Achievement for Students From Somali Backgrounds in Auckland, New Zealand: An Evaluation of a School Catch-Up Programme¹

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Abstract

From arrival in New Zealand refugee students are disadvantaged as they will often not have had the experience of formal education. In New Zealand, the mismatch of age and placement in classes contributes to educational failure. Additionally, Somali and other refugee-background parents are often poorly engaged with their children's schools and with their education. This article reports on the findings of an evaluation of a

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student-centred approach to improving educational achievement, the Somali-led Refugee Student Catch-Up class for primary, intermediate and secondary school students in the Auckland region. A participatory action research approach was used for the evaluation study which included: interviews with programme leaders and teachers; a survey of student educational outcomes; focus groups with students; and classroom observations. The study found that the catch-up programme resulted in improvement in students' marks in English, Mathematics and Science. Students of all ages were consistently regular attenders at the weekend catch-up programme. The study concluded that the catch-up programme had succeeded in improving student achievement, notably at the secondary school levels. Somali community involvement was a critical factor in maintaining leadership, voluntary support and parent and student engagement.

Introduction

The New Zealand Ethnic Employment, Education and Youth Development Trust (NZEEDYT) has, since 2005, been running an academic catch-up class for refugee-background primary, intermediate and secondary school students on Saturday and Sunday afternoons in Mt. Roskill, Auckland. The programme was subject to a three-phase independent evaluation, undertaken by Impact Research NZ between June 2011 and June 2013. This paper reports on the findings of phase three of the evaluation, which took place between February and June 2013. At the time of the evaluation there were 62 enrolled students, including students from Somali, Afghan, Ethiopian, Congolese, Eritrean and Iraqi backgrounds.

The overall aim of the catch-up class is to lift the academic achievement of refugee-background students so that they can be better placed to enter tertiary education, workforce training and employment. The programme is run by volunteers from the Somali community and employs three specialist teachers, one for each of the subjects English, Maths and Science. Bilingual volunteers also contribute their time as mentors and assist with the supervision of students in the classroom. Three classes for different age groups run concurrently each Saturday and Sunday afternoon. During each afternoon session, each group has a class in the three subject areas.

Background

The Auckland region is home to the largest refugee-background populations in New Zealand, many with Horn of Africa backgrounds

(Perumal, 2010). The Somali community is the largest of these groups (Ministry of Health, 2012). The development of a Somali written language is relatively recent, dating from the early twentieth century (Lewis, 1993). Many Somali mothers may not be able to read or write in their own language or in English, and parents who are pre-literate are unable to help with their children's education.

Studies from New Zealand and Australia have identified students from refugee backgrounds as having much higher levels of educational need than other student groups, as a result of spending long periods of time in refugee camps with limited access to formal schooling; experiences of violence and trauma; and struggles with the resettlement process (Dooley, 2009; Hamilton, Anderson, Frater-Matheison, Loewen & Moore, 2003; Major, Wilkinson & Langat, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2003a; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011). Subsequently, many refugee-background students develop learning difficulties and have problems adjusting to school life in New Zealand (Humpage, 2009; Humpage & Fleras, 2000; Ibrahim, 2012; Major, Wilkinson & Langat, 2013). The New Zealand education system is inadequate in dealing with the needs of Somali and many other refugee-background students. O'Rourke (2011) finds systemic barriers to refugee-background students succeeding in the education system, whether:

... based on prior trauma [or] current discrimination ... the lack of trust has ongoing negative consequences for refugee background students: including the decreased likelihood of getting early and accurate advice on career and education planning..., low involvement in joint learning activities, or a reluctance to seek the very support that might help them (p. 31).

The Ministry of Education (2014) reports that in the upper levels of schooling (years 7 to 13), "students are particularly at risk of educational failure, especially if they are likely to have more than one teacher each day for different subject areas" (p. 5). Research shows refugee children as having the lowest levels of performance in New Zealand in literacy (Ministry of Education, 2003b). Refugee children and their teachers face the particular and critical challenge of developing basic English language, literacy and other academic skills and concepts, at an age when other students already have these established (Ministry of Education, 2003b). These students "must be taught the basics to start with. They will not 'catch on' if just left in mainstream classes" (Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 5).

New Zealand and other international studies have shown that refugee children's experience of education is impacted by insufficient support for learning the host-society language, isolation, and the social exclusion that results from bullying, racism and difficulties making friends (Ager & Strang, 2008; Humpage, 2002; Ibrahim, 2012; Wakholi, 2010; Wilkinson & Langat, 2012). Humpage and Fleras (2000) cite the failure to recognise the systemic biases in New Zealand's education system as marginalising refugee youth, many of whom: "are completing secondary school without any qualifications or dropping out early due to the alienation they endure there" (p. 69). Humpage (2002) finds evidence of systemic discrimination against refugee children, not necessarily by intent but rather by omission, which makes educational adaptation difficult in the New Zealand education system.

Furthermore, New Zealand studies have shown that refugee parent engagement with schools and with their children's education is limited (Ibrahim, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2011). Ibrahim's (2012) study of Somali students in the New Zealand school system showed that where Somali families and communities become more engaged and collaborative with their children's schools there are better educational outcomes for Somali students. The study also showed that Somali young people who achieve well academically become good role models and mentors for other Somali students (Ibrahim, 2011). Ibrahim's (2011) four-year longitudinal study found that the mechanisms employed by New Zealand schools to communicate information and engage Somali parents were far from effective in building constructive partnerships between parents and schools. Ibrahim, Small and Grimley (2009) suggested that the Ministry of Education develop policies requiring and equipping schools to put more emphasis on school-family collaboration and establish a mechanism for measuring the effectiveness of such collaboration. Ali and Jones (2000), in a study of the educational needs of Somali students in Camden schools in London, stressed the importance of good home, school and community links, including involving parents in school governing bodies.

Major, Wilkinson and Langat's (2013) study identified African refugee-background students as one of the most underachieving groups in Australia, with educational outcomes significantly lower than other refugee groups. The same study, when discussing Sudanese students' educational success, cites barriers to educational achievement for refugee students as:

...teachers' low academic expectations, inconsistent alignment between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, lack of differentiation of classroom instruction, lack of or insufficient teacher training and preparation, and a view that the 'refugee problem' is the ESL teacher's responsibility...(Major et al., 2013, p. 96).

African refugee-background students struggle with “subject-specific language, assumed cultural knowledge of school topics, the pedagogical approaches and practices used in Australian classrooms and the resources used” (Major et al., 2013, p. 101). Significantly, the study by Major et al. (2013) found that, in secondary schools in particular, teachers did not see teaching the language and literacy related to their area of discipline as part of their teaching responsibilities. The authors recommended improving teachers’ awareness of the processes of second-language acquisition and adjusting expectations and teaching practices appropriately to take account of refugee students’ cultural and complex educational needs. In another Australian study, Oliver, Haig and Grote (2009), found that:

... in addition to developing competencies in English language literacy and numeracy, many students need to acquire basic organizational and time management skills as well as Western cultural concepts embedded in the curriculum (p.25).

The authors also note the devastating impact of racism, which diminishes in their words African student’s willingness to adapt to another culture because of “... their experience of, and inability to negotiate, aggression and racism within the school and community (Oiver, Haig & Grote, 2009, p. 26).

The Evaluation Study - Aims

The evaluation of the Refugee Student Catch-Up Programme was conducted in three phases. The formative evaluation in phases one and two informed the third phase of the evaluation. Among the key issues identified in the 2011 evaluation was the need to improve the relationship between students and teachers including discipline problems (Dyson, 2011). The programme needed to take a more individualised and student-centred approach because the content offered was not always relevant or appropriate to the students learning needs and further this was contributing to student discipline issues.

Differentiated learning was required as students in each class were operating at a range of different performance levels. Teachers and students, in phase one of the evaluation recognised that more targeted learning based on individual student strengths and weaknesses was needed. Additionally, the programme required better alignment with what the students were learning in their mainstream schools, and in particular with the relevant unit standards for secondary school students (Dyson, 2011). In order to do this teachers needed to administer appropriate assessments to determine students' learning levels and to provide targeted assistance. It was recommended that teachers provide assistance to students with homework assignments from their mainstream schools (Dyson, 2011).

The aims for phase three of the evaluation were to determine the effectiveness of classes for each student in terms of their progress, which could then inform areas for programme development and provide evidence of the value of the classes to the stakeholders in the refugee catch-up class. Phase three focused on progress made towards key goals, which had been determined by the programme leaders and teachers at the conclusion of the first phase of the evaluation in November 2011. The goals were to:

1. Create and utilise a new enrolment form
2. Focus on students' individual learning needs
3. Monitor individual students' progress
4. Incorporate experiential learning and fun into the programme
5. Increase parent involvement and communication
6. Improve student-teacher relationships
7. Begin to incorporate internal evaluation mechanisms
8. Develop programme leadership by community members

The second phase of the evaluation, conducted in 2012, provided an opportunity for programme leaders and teachers to begin to self-monitor progress towards the programme goals. This phase was completed in September 2012 and further actions recommended towards the achievement of the key goals (Impact Research NZ, 2013). A further aim in phase three was to develop the skills of programme leaders and teachers in data collection and analysis, in order to enable an ongoing assessment of the programme's effectiveness in improving learning outcomes for refugee-background students.

Methodology

A Community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach was used in developing co-researcher partnerships with teachers, bi-cultural volunteers and students (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson & Wise, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The evaluation undertaken in three phases between June 2011 and 2013 was conducted as a partnership between the researchers and the Somali and other refugee communities involved in the weekend catch-up class. Language-matched community volunteers conducted the student survey, to enable students to speak freely and frankly about their experience of the programme. The research involved refugee community members in every phase of the evaluation including: the design of the study, data collection, the interpretation of results, and the use of the findings to address community concerns about the quality of education available to their children.

Participatory action research (PAR) seeks to understand the world by trying to change it, collaboratively and reflectively. Within a PAR process, "communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). The PAR process required that the terms and conditions of the collaborative process be based on mutual understanding and agreement as to the project goals and objectives. As a CBPAR project, this research was underpinned by a commitment to social justice and transformative action using Israel, Schultz, Parker and Becker's (1984) key principles for community-based research. The principles applied during the evaluation were: recognising refugee communities as a unit of identity; building on the strengths and resources within the community; facilitating collaborative partnerships in all phases of the evaluation; integrating knowledge and action for the mutual benefit of all partners; promoting a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities; utilising a cyclical and iterative process to inform future planning; and disseminating the findings and knowledge gained from the evaluation to all partners (Israel et al., 1984).

The research findings were applied not only to improve the outcomes of the weekend catch-up programme, but also to inform the wider education sector about refugee students' learning needs. Importantly, throughout the evaluation process researchers learned from the knowledge of the community members and community members acquired further skills in how to conduct research (Israel et al., 1984).

Design

Decisions about the design of the evaluation study were informed by and made in collaboration with the study partners: students, teachers and programme leaders. A collaborative approach to the development of the student survey was undertaken in phase three, with students, bicultural volunteers, programme leaders and teachers having input into the content.

As mentioned previously, the time frame for the three phases of the evaluation was from June 2011 to June 2013. This time frame supported a formative approach to the evaluation, in which the findings from phase one were used to improve the design and delivery of the programme during phase two, and phase two findings informed phase three (Impact Research NZ, 2013). Phase one of the evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What happens during the catch-up class?
2. What works well/not so well from the point of view of the students, parents, programme leaders (who were refugee community leaders), catch-up class teachers, mentors and school refugee coordinators?
3. How and why does the catch-up class make a difference to students?

Ethical considerations

Participants' signed and informed consent was gained prior to the commencement of the study. The teachers, bicultural volunteers and students who participated in the study were informed of the purpose of the evaluation, what their involvement would entail, and of their right to not participate and to choose to withdraw at any time throughout the process. Participants were informed that anonymity and confidentiality would be protected and that participant names and any other identifying information would not be used in the final report.

Data collection

The collection of data for the evaluation of the refugee student catch-up class took a range of forms including: conversations with programme leaders and teachers; sighting of documents associated with the programme; a survey of students; and a focus group of students and observation of classes (Impact Research NZ, 2013).

Discussions with programme leaders and teachers

Extensive field notes were taken during meetings with programme leaders and teachers. Audio recordings were made and later transcribed in order to capture a range of participant views and experiences (Impact Research NZ, 2013).

As part of the formative evaluation, a progress template was developed relating to the goals identified by the programme leaders and teachers in phase one of the evaluation. The template formed the framework for a group discussion in which programme leaders and teachers evaluated progress towards each of the goals that had been set (Impact Research NZ, 2013). Collaboratively, the group also identified areas for further development in relation to the identified goals. Researchers were shown documents such as student enrolment forms, class registers, examples of assessment tools that had been used in class, and examples of teaching resources.

Classroom observations

The researchers observed classes in the catch-up programme on a number of occasions. Of interest were the interactions between students and teachers, student engagement in learning activities, the range of activities facilitated by teachers, classroom resources utilised, and student behaviour (Impact Research NZ, 2013). Field notes were taken during observations.

Student focus group

The student focus group involved senior students only (those in years 12 and 13). The nine senior students in the refugee catch-up programme, comprising three girls and six boys, all chose to participate in the focus group. Programme leaders and teachers were not present in the focus group, so students were able to speak freely about their experiences attending the classes.

Student survey

Students in years six and above were invited to participate in a student survey. All of the invited students chose to answer questions on a survey questionnaire, although some chose not to answer all questions (Impact Research NZ, 2013). Question areas included: their frequency of, and reasons for, attending the catch-up classes; their perceptions on how much the classes supported their learning; and their perceptions on how well the catch-up class teachers met their learning needs. The survey also provided an opportunity for students to make suggestions

around other types of activities they would like to have included in the programme and any ways that the programme might be improved.

The questionnaire incorporated 14 questions. The questions were either multiple choice, Likert scale (i.e. strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) or invited open-ended responses. Thirty-eight students participated in the survey.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the student survey questionnaires was entered into an Excel spread sheet for statistical analysis and used to generate descriptive figures. Qualitative data from student surveys, in the form of open-ended responses, were entered into an Excel spread sheet and then exported to a Word document where comments were read multiple times and then grouped according to common ideas or themes for analysis.

Transcripts were analysed line-by-line for thematic content indicating the processes occurring in the refugee catch-up programme. Simultaneously, field notes and memos were made and became part of a constant comparative analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Progress

This section discusses progress made towards the key goals generated by programme leaders and teachers following reporting of the findings of phase one of the evaluation, and the further actions recommended at the conclusion of phase two.

Create and utilise the new enrolment form

A student enrolment form was developed and a form completed for all students. The enrolment form has been utilised for all new enrolments. The form includes relevant demographic data on each student, including their age, year level in mainstream school and the name of the school they attend. In New Zealand, the NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) is the main secondary school qualification for students in years 11-13 and can be gained at three levels—usually level 1 in year 11, level 2 in year 12 and level 3 in year 13. The enrolment form for senior students lists the student's NCEA subjects and levels. From the enrolment forms, class registers have been generated for each subject as a means of recording and monitoring attendance and to enable teachers to record assessment results.

Greater focus on students' individualised learning needs

Teachers understood the need for more individualised support for students and were focusing more intensively on students' individual needs. Students reflected that the greater emphasis on providing learning opportunities more tailored to their individual needs had improved their understanding of classroom work.

Strategies to support individualised teaching

In the senior English class, students were working towards a range of achievement standards and an individualised approach was being used to support students to work through the tasks necessary to achieve NCEA standards. The bilingual volunteers assisted with classes by providing mentoring and student support. Teachers found having bilingual tutors very useful for supporting students' individualised learning goals. Teachers reported that having bilingual tutors explain subject-specific terminology in the students' first language resulted in successful learning, stating that:

...they just don't get that one-to-one help at school and they are not confident enough to voice up their opinions or say that they are not sure what to do... (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 14).

Individual learning needs

Just under half of the students surveyed (47%) said that the teachers understood them and their learning needs. This score had improved since 2012, when one-third of the students indicated that they felt the teachers understood them and their learning needs.

In the senior English class, students were working towards a range of achievement standards and so an individualised approach had been adopted by the teacher whereby she supported the students to work through the tasks necessary for the standard they were working on. The teacher helped the students to structure and self-assess their work by:

...help[ing] them to brainstorm ideas and then proof read[ing] the work they might need to submit the following week... (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 14).

Lesson content

Almost half of the students (49%) said that the topics covered were the right ones for them. Slightly less than one-third of students (30%)

either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the classes covered the right topics for them, again highlighting the need for an individualised approach to teaching, while also indicating the challenge this poses due to the diversity of abilities, ages and year levels within the classes.

Learning levels

Sixty-nine per cent of students indicated that the classes are at the right level for them. One student commented that:

...they make me understand and teach at a speed I can understand. (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 16).

Academic improvement

Students were asked whether they thought that the catch-up classes had helped them to improve their marks in school. In years 2011 and 2012, 65 per cent of the students said that the catch up classes had improved their marks but in 2013 the proportion had dropped slightly to 57 per cent. The lower response rate in 2013 may be due to the higher number of students who were new to the programme, compared to previous years (Impact Research NZ, 2013). Importantly, student's perspectives on how much the classes had helped them to improve in English, maths and science were positive.

Eighty-six per cent of students indicated that the catch up class had helped them to improve their skills in English, with 37 per cent saying it had helped them 'a lot' and nearly half (48 per cent) saying it had helped them 'a bit' (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p.17). Seventy-five per cent of students indicated that their maths skills had improved with the help of the class; with 22 per cent saying it had helped 'a lot' and 53 per cent saying it had helped 'a bit' (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p.17). Slightly over three in five students (61%) indicated that their science skills had improved with help from the class; 27 per cent said they had improved 'a lot', while 33 per cent said they had improved 'a bit'. Students made the following comments in relation to their learning in the various subject areas:

...they teach us how to write essays and do maths...
...it helps me to understand my English, math and science...
...I got good marks at school... (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 18).

The majority of students stated that teachers had helped their learning by providing individualised teaching, useful suggestions and study support.

Parent-school engagement

Discussing their parents' engagement in their education, most students in the study said that their parents had asked them about their progress at school and with homework, but only half had attended a parent-teacher meeting at their child's school. The evaluation found that:

...only a relatively small proportion of students who attend the catch-up classes have parents who are in a position to be able to help them with school work or homework, and for a significant minority of students, 12%, the catch-up classes are the only support they get with academic work outside of school (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 23).

Findings of Phase Three of the Evaluation

The students reported that the catch-up classes helped them to learn in a range of ways and that the teachers made the programme an easy learning environment.

Enrolments

In April 2013, there were 62 students enrolled in the programme, mostly Somali. However, there was increasing diversity in the ethnic backgrounds of the students attending the classes including Afghani, Ethiopian, Congolese, Eritrean and Iraqi students. The primary/intermediate class was mainly year seven and eight students, but there were also students from years five and six. The primary/intermediate class had the largest roll with 29 students. Thirteen students were enrolled in the junior high school class (years 9 and 10), and 20 were enrolled in the senior high school class (years 11, 12 and 13).

The numbers of students completing the survey were relatively evenly spread across the school years six to thirteen. Students in the primary/intermediate group (years 6, 7 and 8) comprised the largest group to complete the survey (39% of respondents); 32 per cent were senior high school students, in either year 12 or 13; and 29 per cent were in years 9, 10 or 11 at high school.

Attendance

Most enrolled students attended the programme regularly, with nearly three-quarters of students attending at least five times per month and 45 per cent saying that they attended either seven or eight times each month. Only 11 per cent of students indicated that they attend infrequently (once or twice per month). The frequency and stability of attendance in 2013 were similar to previous years.

Reasons for attendance

Students were able to select more than one response to the question “What is the main reason that you attend the catch up class?” including: ‘my parent(s) want me to’; ‘to improve my maths, science and English’; ‘to spend time with my friends’; ‘to get out of my house’; and ‘to get help with my homework’. Most students reported that they liked attending the classes because they got help with their homework and were able to improve their academic results (82%). Fewer students cited other reasons for attending which included: their parents wanted them to attend (29%); to spend time with their friends (24%); and to get out of the house (11%). A student describing the benefits of attending the programme said:

...the catch-up classes is a very good thing many students pay for tutors well we get free help and it feels better to learn in this environment than at school (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 12).

Being able to review or preview work that would be covered in mainstream classes was highlighted:

It's an easier way to help understand the school work; the teachers help me out... (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 12).

Some students indicated that were it not for the help they received in the catch-up class, they would not have been able to complete work sent home by teachers in their mainstream schools:

...It helps you get your homework done because you probably wouldn't do it otherwise, and I get help with my homework... (Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 12).

Non-Academic Activities

When students had been asked about the non-academic activities they wanted in the programme, they most commonly asked for sports to be included as part of the weekend catch-up sessions (Impact Research NZ, 2013). One of the goals of phase three was to incorporate experiential learning and fun into the teaching programme. At the end of 2012, a sports day was held to celebrate the year's achievements. Teachers found that:

...it helped the students to relax in the company of their teachers in an informal setting for mutual enjoyment, and helped to support the student-teacher relationships...
(Impact Research NZ, 2013, p. 20).

The day was so successful it was incorporated into the end of term programme in subsequent years (Impact Research NZ, 2013).

Monitoring Individual Students' Progress

Teachers were utilising formative and summative assessments on a more frequent basis, to assess student progress and to inform planning of the future teaching programme. Summative assessment is used to summarise student achievement at a particular time, whereas formative assessment is intended to promote further improvement of student attainment (Crooks, 2001). Formative assessment is educational measurement that is used to inform the teaching and learning process (Ussher & Earl, 2010). Ideally, both the teacher and the student will gain information from the assessment and use it collaboratively to plan future learning activities (Hattie, 2003). The important thing in formative assessment is to gain as much information as possible with respect to what the student has achieved, what has not been achieved, and what the student requires to best facilitate further progress (Hattie, 2003; Ussher & Earl, 2010). The introduction of class registers referred to earlier made possible the systematic recording of student assessment results, and thus the incorporation of summative assessment into the teaching cycle such that individual student progress could be monitored. The results were: the introduction of class registers for each subject, enabling teachers to record student assessment results; a greater focus on students' individualised learning needs; and the incorporation of summative assessment into the teaching cycle, with student assessment results systematically recorded in order to monitor the progress of individual students.

Teachers' monitoring of students' academic progress had improved significantly in 2013 with regular tests administered to assess learning, identify gaps for individual students and to plan future teaching. Teachers reported that students were now regularly bringing in work from their mainstream schools to show teachers and to discuss their own progress (Impact Research NZ, 2013). Teachers had conducted diagnostic testing to determine the range of learning levels in each class and to plan classes accordingly.

Summative assessment can also be used formatively, if it provides feedback to the students, teachers and programme leaders, so as to lead to further improvement (Crooks, 2001). The formative and summative assessments undertaken in the study were effective strategies in improving the students' performance.

Discussion

It is clear from Phase Three of the evaluation that there was a clear shift towards a more individualised and student-centred teaching approach. Teachers on the programme acknowledged that small-group and individualised teaching was a crucial factor in student achievement (Impact Research, 2013). An important outcome of the Phase Three evaluation was the collection of data on students and student progress. Student achievement was being monitored through increased assessment and the recording of data, and both of these methods were instrumental in providing individualised learning for the diverse range of ages and learning needs in the catch-up class. Programme leaders and teachers were effectively using data on student learning levels to inform their planning and teaching in the classes.

A clearer focus on the learning needs of the students had resulted not only in improved learning outcomes for students but also in improved relationships between students and teachers. For secondary school students in particular, a focus on the academic skills needed to achieve NCEA standards had resulted in most senior students stating that they were getting the study support and help with homework that they needed.

Recommendations of the study

The recommendations of phase three of the evaluation were to continue to provide individualised teaching and in particular to focus on senior high school academic achievement. It was suggested that a part of each afternoon session be structured as a 'study/homework clinic,' particularly for students working towards NCEA credits. This could

involve students bringing in work that they were undertaking towards NCEA achievement standards in their mainstream schools, or material that they needed to revise for upcoming assessments.

Continuing activity to build teachers' and volunteers' capacity for self-monitoring and evaluation of the classes was important to the ongoing success of the programme. Teachers recognised the benefits of pre- and post-teaching testing as a way of measuring student progress, but had yet to implement this systematically across all classes and age levels. Future plans to improve academic achievement include the standardised testing of students in each subject area to determine progress in relation to expected standards for the various age groups.

In the future, introducing parent-teacher evenings was suggested as a way of strengthening relationships with students' families, as well as introducing reporting to parents as a means through which to further engage parents in their children's education. A further recommendation was a review of the quality assurance practices for curriculum and teaching, by introducing a facilitated peer review of teaching to encourage reflective practice (Impact Research NZ, 2013).

Conclusion

The evaluation of the Refugee Academic Catch-Up Class Programme was undertaken to strengthen the framework and processes of the programme and to ensure that students' learning needs were being met. The three part evaluation of the programme between June 2011 and June 2013 successfully used a participatory action approach to explore the perspectives of all key stakeholders including the students, teachers and programme leaders (Impact Research NZ, 2013). The programme achieved an improvement in school marks for up to 65 per cent of the students attending.

The study found that there had been significant progress towards the goals established during the course of the evaluation. Teachers had become more responsive to the individual needs of students, and were more engaged with the learning needs of their students. Students participated in a greater range of academic and recreational activities which had fostered improved student-teacher relationships. The success of the programme was underpinned by the commitment of the community volunteers who provided leadership and administration, and through the dedicated work of the teaching staff. Refugee community involvement in the programme was instrumental in providing mentorship to the students in their own languages, when needed. The study showed that individualised learning strategies were a successful

approach to improving refugee student learning outcomes. This finding has potential implications for lifting the achievement standards for students from refugee backgrounds in primary, intermediate and secondary schools in New Zealand.

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