



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Centre for Multicultural Youth
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: Vic.

Summary

Summary of recommendations

Social connections, quality relationships with and at school, and the facilitation of cultural and social capital should be explicitly recognised as key elements of educational success.

Targeted support to students and families of refugee and migrant backgrounds to increased positive engagement with their schools and their learning should be provided. These initiatives include Out-of-School-Hours learning support programs and Multicultural Education Aides (and the equivalent positions).

Replace the term Parent Engagement with the term Family Engagement to ensure varying family groupings are not unintentionally excluded and to ensure the variations are recognised and valued.

All recognised teaching qualifications should require comprehensive cultural competency components as a standard part of the minimum qualification

All school staff who interact with families and students should have access to ongoing and regular professional development in cultural competency with minimum requirements for completion.

Main submission

Background

CMY is a Victorian not-for-profit organisation supporting young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to build better lives in Australia. Our purpose is to ensure that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds have every opportunity to succeed in Australia.

CMY believes that education is an essential part of successful integration for migrant and refugee youth and is crucial for preparing youth of all backgrounds to be productive and well-adjusted members of society. However, young people from

migrant and refugee background can find it difficult to fully engage in the Australian education system without additional support. Language barriers, cultural differences and disrupted education may all present barriers to a student's success.

CMY's MY Education program provides resources and support crucial to the success of primary and secondary students' learning. A key aspect of this is support for schools and community organisations to provide high quality Out-of-School-Hours learning programs (otherwise known as Homework Clubs) for students of refugee and migrant backgrounds. This submission draws upon our expertise in this area.

A recent and more detailed exploration of the issues and recommendations is documented in CMY's submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes, available here: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Migration/SettlementOutcomes/Submissions

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What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

Research indicates that schools are important support sites for settlement of students of refugee and migrant backgrounds, as they provide young people with a sense of belonging, a sense of safety and security, for establishing trust and acceptance, for social support, and for acting as a bridge to success in the broader community. This aspect of education should be recognised as a key factor of success.

School is also an important site for development of social relationships with success in education supported by the quality of the relationships that young people and

their parents forge in the school setting. Schools also play a critical role in the facilitating cultural and social capital for young people and for their families. Social support and feelings of safety at school are thus integral to success.

Workers from CMY's education programs note that schools and teachers have reported feeling ill-equipped to meet the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. A lack of cultural responsiveness or awareness of the impacts of the refugee and migration experience on young people can lead to misinterpretation of student behaviour, resulting in negative responses or the failure to identify needs early. This can be particularly acute for students who are disengaged or are experiencing marginalization from the community, are from areas of high disadvantage, and parents who have limited knowledge of the Australian education system. The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria's 'Exclusion report' identifies young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds as having increased vulnerability to being excluded from school due to lack of capacity to meet these students specific needs.

Building on a community development approach, strengths-focused work is vital in working with young people and their families. Many migrant and refugee families have high levels of resilience and have managed to deal effectively with many challenges already. Educational success would ensure that students from all backgrounds stay engaged in education and their schooling contributes to the sense of belonging and community connection for all.

Recommendation

Social connections, quality relationships with and at school and the facilitation of cultural and social capital should be explicitly recognised as key elements of educational success.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

The focus of this submission is to increase the family engagement of families from refugee and migrants backgrounds. As such the following program suggestions are focused on that aspect of enhancing educational excellence.

Targeted support to increase family engagement

Across the OECD one quarter of young people who arrive in their host country after the age of 15 are more likely to drop out of school early – either before they arrive or on completion of compulsory schooling in the host country. This compares to just 10% of the native born population. Programs that target this vulnerable cohort are needed to ensure their continued engagement. The following is two examples of successful programming approaches.

Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support programs

Family engagement contributes to keeping students engaged in their education. Out-of-School-Hours Learning Support programs or OSHLSP can play a key role in connecting with families who may be difficult to engage in other ways. OSHLSP provide high quality learning support to children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their families. They also assist families to better support their children's learning at home.

OSHLSP work to increase the connection between families and schools. The projects facilitate two-way learning and engagement between schools and families, to improve students' learning and wellbeing outcomes. They can include ongoing groups, or a series of short-term interactive workshops, and can be held before, during or after school.

The following models have been implemented in schools across Victoria and a number of case studies are available through the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

Family Learning Group: parents and carers meet regularly at the school to build knowledge and skills to support their children's learning, such as English language skills. These groups provide an ongoing opportunity for families to connect with each other and the school, and are supported by school staff such as MEAs, principals, and teachers, and community organisation staff such as bilingual workers.

Family Workshops: parents and carers attend a series of interactive workshops focused on increasing understanding of school, the education system, transitions, educational and career pathways, and ways that families can support their children in their learning.

Family Learning Space: schools create a welcoming and culturally appropriate space for families at school. The space provides an environment where children and families can work on learning tasks together and where families build their social networks through informal interactions with school staff and other families.

Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) and other programs

MEAs (and their equivalents) are another targeted support service for students and families of refugee and migrant backgrounds. MEAs provide an invaluable service to both families and schools. They are able to increase the engagement for English as an Additional Language families by facilitating communication in families' first languages and also offer tailored support for EAL students in the classroom. The Victorian Department of Education and Training identify MEA's as being able to "contribute to making the mainstream curriculum more responsive to Victoria's rich cultural heritage and diversity." In CMY's experience MEA's can have a powerful impact on the connections forged between schools and families and on the confidence levels of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

In 2015 CMY made a submission to the Victorian Government's consultation on the Education State in which we highlighted a number of recommendations to improve education opportunities for young people of refugee and migrant background that look beyond English language acquisition alone. In addition to these, investment in programs within schools that holistically combine mentoring, social support and incentives for young people and, support for parental and community engagement in education are known to work well in addressing many of these issues. Other approaches include programs that support young people to engage in their learning in school and can range from targeted in-school academic and social support, to activities aimed at supporting young people to develop positive peer relationships through recreation and sport. Also important are programs that encourage families and parents to be part of the school community.

Broaden the concept of parental engagement to family engagement

It is important to recognise that children and young people live in a diverse range of family types. Refugee and migrant journeys add complexity to the family – families can be profoundly disrupted in the process of becoming a refugee or migrant and arriving in Australia. Students may be living with older siblings who have carer responsibilities or in single parent households, extended family groups or a nuclear family who have previously relied on extended family support, that they do not have access to in Australia. Some students may have come without their parents and be living in foster situations.

It's important to be aware of how our language and some of our practices may be unintentionally excluding some family groups. Families may be one or two parents; multigenerational households with one or more grandparent; children living in the care of grandparents, older siblings, aunts or uncles or other family members; children living with foster or other carers; older siblings taking an active role in supporting young siblings' education, including homework.

Recommendations

Provide targeted support to students and families of refugee and migrant backgrounds to increased positive engagement with their schools and learning. These supports include Out-of-School-Hours learning support programs and Multicultural Education Aides (and the equivalent positions).

Replace the term Parent Engagement with the term Family Engagement to ensure varying family groupings are not unintentionally excluded and to ensure the variations are recognised and valued.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

One of the key factors contributing to challenges for young people remaining engaged with education is a lack of understanding within the school system of the

cultural diversity and impact of migration and refugee journeys on education. Experiences of racism and discrimination result in further marginalization for young people contributing to educational disengagement.

Parents' lack of knowledge of the school system and curriculum, their own English language ability, disjuncture between expectations for their children's educational prospects and young people's language and literacy abilities, and lack of support to facilitate young people's engagement in school in Australia were factors identified by CMY workers as key contributors to school disengagement among young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Schools are also critical sites for the development of knowledge and skills to navigate post-education pathways, both for students and their families.

Cultural competency is a key skill required in Australian classrooms today to address these barriers and should be regarded as a minimum requirement of teaching staff and other school staff.

Recommendations

All recognised teaching qualifications should require comprehensive cultural competency components as a standard part of the minimum qualification

All school staff who interact with families and students should have access to ongoing professional development in cultural competency with minimum requirements for completion.