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Shifting Space and Cultural Place: The Transition Experiences of African Young People in Western Sydney High Schools

Abstract

How are recently arrived refugee young people from Africa faring in Australian high schools? This paper documents a research project undertaken with 65 young people across three schools in the Western Sydney suburbs of Blacktown and Bankstown. The researchers discuss the roles of schools as sites where African young people experience and relate to the upheaval of forced migration and make transitions toward citizenship and belonging in multicultural Australia. Specifically, this paper will address how educational settings are responding to the needs of students, teachers, and communities.

Introduction

Africa is currently the focus of Australia's refugee program and is likely to remain so in the years ahead. The growing numbers of African young people arriving in Australia impacts in Sydney and Melbourne (which are the settlement centres) and, more recently, across regional centres. In South East Australia these include Geelong, Launceston, Newcastle, Coffs Harbour and Warrnambool. In these places, teachers and youth service providers are dealing with newly arrived young people with whom they have little prior knowledge or experience.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the research community with knowledge based upon a research project undertaken from August through December 2004. The 'Young Africans in Schools Project' (YASP) was a partnership between the University of Western Sydney (UWS Centre for Cultural Research) and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET Multicultural Programs Unit). The project involved consultations and creative workshops with 65 recently arrived African young people across three high school sites in Western Sydney. All but five of the students were of Southern Sudanese background.

Overall, we found the schooling system is not working well for many recently arrived African young people. There are success stories but, in general, students are struggling within new institutional settings. In the three schools we surveyed the numbers of newly arrived African students have rapidly multiplied. Evidently, teachers, school support staff and youth workers feel ill-equipped and under resourced to deal with the soaring numbers. While school staff and youth specialists have successfully worked with refugee young people, the new African students present a range of unfamiliar cultural, linguistic and historical backgrounds. This paper provides a snapshot of the issues,

particularly about transition to and between schools, impacting upon African young people in Sydney.

We initiated our research with the overarching question, What are the supportive factors that schools need to provide for recently arrived African young people to be successful in the NSW public education system? Six themes guided our research: transition points, the classroom, parents/guardians and communities, teachers, pathways to the future, and other school activities. The theme of transitions brought forth many responses from students, and is the focus of this paper. Transitions are indicative of changes experienced in a new country, new cultures, and new schools.

The first part of this paper provides background information about the current settlement patterns and issues. The research methodology is then described which includes discussion of creative workshop approaches. The second part picks up the themes of transitions to and between schools. We provide examples to illustrate the predicaments, conflicting loyalties, hopes and expectations of the young people who participated in our project. This paper is not overly theoretical; rather, it presents empirical findings of the Young Africans in Schools Project (YASP).

Although belonging to discrete national groups, African young people in Australia experience affinities, including commonalities and cultural dispositions. Tied to these are attachments to pan-African motifs and styles. For instance, many Southern Sudanese young people speak Swahili (having learnt it in Kenya) and enjoy socializing with Swahili speaking Central Africans.

Background

There are scarcely any major studies dealing with African refugees in Australia and none with a focus upon young people (cf. Beattie and Ward 1997; Gow 2002; Udo-Ekpo 1999). Accordingly, educators working with young Africans are without an adequate knowledge base from which to build their practice. In this regard information is needed which can assist schools and service providers dealing with African young people, their families and communities. Conversely, African young people need education about the changed context in which they live. However, providing a knowledge base does not mean conveying generalisations about one group of Africans or another, along with maps and language descriptions. At least in our research, this would belie the complexity and individuality among the project participants.

During March 2004 a public forum was held in Cabramatta called 'African Communities Settling in NSW'. Over 350 people attended, including 40 recently arrived African young people. The highlight was the Youth Panel featuring eight students from selected Western Sydney high schools. They variously originated from Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo, Somalia, and Sierra Leone. Their shared journeys and experiences conveyed the immediate need for knowledge and resources concerning the specific experiences of African young people.

In 2002-03 Africa was the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) regional priority area for offshore humanitarian resettlement: 47 per cent (or 5,628) of total offshore grants were from the region, the majority from Southern Sudan. Africa remained the priority for 2003-04 with 7,700

refugees due to arrive (DIMIA Africa Newsletter 2004). The majority of Africans will enter Australia under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) and smaller numbers in the Refugee category.

The 1990s saw thousands of refugees of Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean backgrounds arriving from the Horn of Africa. They are now established groups. After the year 2000, the focus shifted toward refugees of Southern Sudanese background. In 2005, the priority moved toward refugees originating from the Great Lakes region of Central Africa (Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo) and Liberians from West Africa. For instance, in February 2005, 350 Liberian refugees arrived, with 56 settling in Sydney. In March 2005, 91 Burundians arrived in NSW.

In terms of Australia's immigration history, the emerging African communities represent a distinct pattern. They are refugees who bring with them enormous trauma from civil conflicts such as torture, rape, family separation and loss, and community breakdown. Moreover, they are difficult to classify in terms of identity, language, community and settlement needs. Added to this is Australia's general lack of knowledge about Africa.

Some of these communities, such as the diverse Southern Sudanese, are minorities in their own country and remain small and splintered in Australia. The Southern Sudanese in Sydney are a heterogeneous community with various ethnic groups and regional affiliations including Dinka, Nuer, Nuba and Achole. They generally live in the Blacktown, Fairfield and Bankstown areas of Western Sydney. The migration pathways for the young people in our study were from Sudan to either Egypt (Cairo) or Kenya (commonly residing in Kakuma or Dadaab refugee camps). Others resided in up to four countries before travelling to Australia (including Libya, Ethiopia and Uganda).

The high proportion of young people in Sydney's African refugee communities has direct implications on schools. Young people from refugee backgrounds face immense challenges in the settlement process. In Australia they combine new schooling with domestic and family responsibilities. Added to this are moral obligations towards extended family members remaining in Africa.

They must locate themselves within a new cultural space, yet also try to find security within the spaces of their own—albeit fractured—families and communities. This Australian cultural space entails an immediate shift into a new semi-autonomous identity called 'youth'. It seems, the category 'youth' is novel and initially confuses both the young people and their families. While 'youth' is recognized as a key developmental stage of life in Australia, in Southern Sudan, for example, the category is relatively unknown because at around the age of 12, or the onset of puberty, a child is usually initiated into adulthood (Malual 2004: 6). The ambiguity of the term 'youth' potentially complicates transition to and between schools.

The literature relating to the settlement experiences of refugee young people is remarkably weighted toward mental health considerations—which tend to individualise and pathologise complex processes. Our study shows that the experiences of African young people are best understood in relational ways. Probably the biggest challenge for recently arrived young people is to seek out a community to which they can safely belong. This is why schools are such important sites for what we loosely call 'cultural citizenship'. By this we mean experiences of attachment and belonging to a society

occurring at the level of everyday lived experiences (Dahlgren, 2003: 142). For recently arrived refugees, who seldom venture far outside of their local area, their primary experiences of belonging in Australian society occur at their schools.

Moore (1997) considers the major challenge for refugee young people is to seek out a community to which they can belong. They may feel guilt or anxiety for 'betraying' their cultural origins, yet suffer isolation from the broader community if they do not embrace the dominant culture. Burnett and Peel (2001) suggest the 'most therapeutic event for a refugee child can be to become part of the local school community' (p.547). At the same time, as Muecke (2003) highlights, young refugees use a variety of strategies to deal with stress and anxiety including talking with friends, family, counsellors, to playing sport, listening to music, and participating in community activities.

Similarly, teaching and learning are enhanced by connections and partnerships with the broader community outside the school (CommunityMatters, 2001, pp. 13-14). In this respect, parental participation in school is important and can enhance learning outcomes. Research in Australia indicates that structure, consistency and predictability are important; a major need of young refugees with fragmented or minimal education experience is to feel in control while entering a new school environment.

In this respect, schools in places like Blacktown and Bankstown are major sites of transition for refugee young people. For many young refugees, school represents first contacts with Australian institutions and new social groups. Transitions present challenges and unfamiliar places, yet also present hope and possibilities for familiarity with a new community.

This study more generally contributes to youth, education and migration studies by comprehensively exploring the everyday (qua cultural) ways young refugees proactively deal with upheaval and transition. The research maps the ways young African refugees express themselves, make sense of their world, and through it contribute to cultural dynamics within their schools and youth cultures within the Western Sydney region (cf. Butcher and Thomas 2003).

With the above background in mind, we began our workshops with students by discussing and reflecting on the transition process. We found that becoming part of a school in Australia was in itself a crucially important transition point. This issue was highlighted not only by the students but also by teachers and parents and guardians. Certainly, the process of transition to a new school and from one school to another resonate with comparative challenges. With that in mind, an additional theme that we felt important to this research focuses on the journey from Africa, flight within and between countries in Africa, and point of departure from the continent.

Young Africans in Schools Project

The 'Young Africans in Schools Project' (YASP) is a qualitative study investigating the schooling experiences of 65 recently arrived African young people at three Western Sydney public high schools. The project maps the ways these young people relationally negotiate new learning in public school contexts, and through it contribute to cultural dynamics within their schools. More broadly, it explores how young people relate to citizenship and experience belonging in urban Australia.¹

Methods

Students, teachers, parents/guardians and various African communities contributed to this project by offering their experiences and reflections of transition. Methods of collecting data from each group are described in the following sections.

Students: Workshops

Students were accessed at a high school and an Intensive English Centre (IEC) in Blacktown, and at a high school in Bankstown. The major component of the project was a series of five arts-based workshops with young people at each of the schools. In collaboration with two multilingual arts facilitators (Lyndall Thurley and Jok Mugo) we conducted the workshops with six groups of young people in Years 7-8 and Years 9-11. The participants were recruited with the assistance of school staff and consisted of equal numbers of girls and boys. We asked for high, medium and low academic achievers, very new arrivals and those who had been in Australia for more than one year. The young people were overwhelmingly of Southern Sudanese (60) background, which represented Australia's refugee intake priority at the time. Other participants originated from Sierra Leone (3), Somalia (1), and Senegal (1). A workshop approach enabled us to gather large amounts of information in limited periods of time; and, meeting for five sessions enabled us to develop a working relationship with students.

The students enjoyed creating tactile objects in a group workshop setting. The arts-based approach enabled us to sensitively explore a range of issues with them. After the initial two sessions, the young people became very generous toward the research team and openly expressed their experiences and feelings about transition to Australia. They created a portfolio of paintings, drawings, textile collages, and drama plays—which constituted the research data. Upon completion, each student received a professional development certificate of participation from the NSW DET and UWS.

Art-based workshops allow access to research participants who may find one-on-one, face-to-face interviews scary and unfamiliar. For our research, they offered a safe environment where participants could share experiences, beliefs and attitudes in the company of people with similar backgrounds. The workshops relied upon facilitated collective activities as a way of exploring and solving problems. In this way, students built upon each other's words, ideas and feelings. The interaction among group participants often gave more weight to participants' opinions, decreasing the influence we had over the workshop process.

A second important element of this phase was the debriefing by the research team immediately following each workshop. The debriefing sessions provided a map of the progress of the workshops, allowing us to not only discuss the outcomes of a particular workshop, but also to streamline the workshop methods as the relationships with each group of students developed over the weeks. No group was the same.

Teachers: Focus Group Interviews

Focus group sessions were conducted with selected teachers. These addressed the range of research themes and allowed teachers to identify what they saw as the key issues. The focus group interviews were between 1 1/2 to 2 hours in length at a time that

was convenient for both the teachers and the school. In the same manner, focus groups were conducted with selected teachers at IECs. These provided data concerning teacher approaches toward the preparation of students for transition from IECs to secondary schools.

An important dimension of the research was also the transition from primary to secondary school. Supplementary teacher data was collected from primary school teachers via focus groups to explore their experiences preparing recently arrived African students for the transition to primary and secondary school.

Teachers: Professional Development Workshops

In November 2004, two professional development workshops were conducted in collaboration with DET and focused around the YASP research. These were held in Bankstown and Blacktown. The workshops provided an opportunity for brainstorming of ideas and experiences. The workshops served the pragmatic function of enabling teachers to develop networks for sharing activities and strategies that worked, or that did not work, with their African students. These workshops also enabled teachers to connect with important sources of support through their colleagues, as well as contribute to a growing knowledge base about African young people in schools.

Parents/Guardians: Community Consultations

A one-off, two-hour consultation was conducted with parents/guardians of students. The community consultation was held at the Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre, and included parents whose children were attending many of the schools in the area. Parents/guardians were given the opportunity to offer their expectations and experiences in relation to their children's education. The session was divided into two groups (approximately 40 minutes) brainstorming and feeding back their views and experiences to the larger group. Interpreters were used for these sessions.

The remainder of this paper focuses on the research, specifically the process of transition to and between schools in Australia. We begin by addressing students' experiences with trauma, and how memories of the past present challenges to their transitions to Australian schools. We then look at a very important transition – that of IEC to high school. This is followed by teachers and parent/guardian perspectives as they related to the young people's experiences of transition. Finally, we conclude by offering some recommendations that have emerged from these findings.

Transitions – Student Perspectives

It is difficult to concentrate in the class when your mind is not at peace ... you need peace in your heart before you can do all these things" (high school student)

Transitions are important. The above quotation encapsulates a key challenge many young African refugees experience as they adjust to school in Australia. Many of the students bring with them a background of trauma and interrupted schooling. Students

suggest that peer support, community support, homework help and teacher understanding are some ways in which schools in Australia can support transitions.

Teachers and school faculties are beginning to recognise the context of students' transition experiences and refugee journeys. One teacher was astutely aware of the impact of trauma on learning outcomes,

My students...they were saying that sometimes they get flashbacks or thoughts come into their head and they completely switch off to the lesson...and they were saying that they want people to understand that sometimes thoughts and memories just come back...and they feel uncomfortable (IEC teacher)

Another teacher emphasized the need for high school teachers to build knowledge about their students' backgrounds,

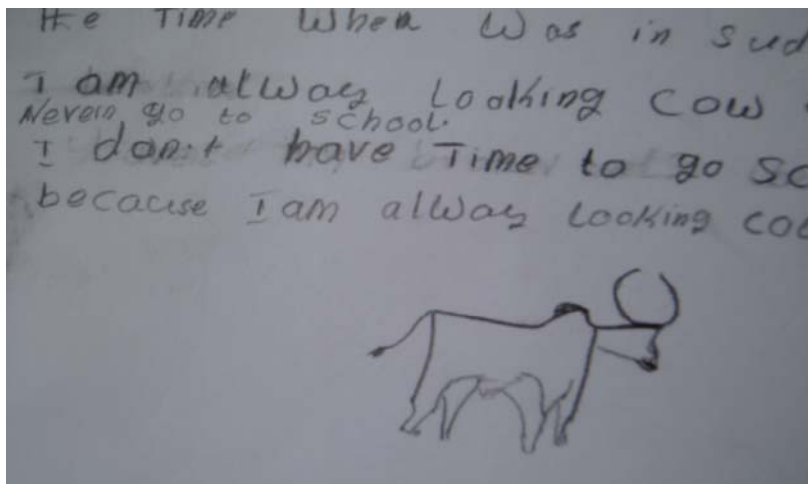
... if the teachers [high school] knew where these students were coming from, what they've had in their background, their country, the trauma that they've been through, then I think they could cater for them a lot better. I mean, a lot of that information I think IECs are privy to and high schools aren't, and I think that could really help high school teachers to be able to support the students as much as we can and know where they're coming from and what they've been through ... to sort of help guide them as much as you can. (High School teacher)

With the above quotations in mind, we found the impact of the journey to Australia was a crucial aspect of adjustment. Among the research cohort, those young people (boys and girls) who lived in Cairo before arriving in Australia were compelled to work long hours for Egyptian employers. They were treated badly and often not paid for their labour. By and large, schooling was not accessible. After five years in Cairo, a 17 year old arriving in Australia may have no formal schooling experience. Meanwhile, those who travelled via refugee camps in Northern Kenya were subjected to all manner of hardships. In this regard, it is not unusual for a young person to arrive in Australia unable to read or write in any language. During the course of our workshops, the students shared their experiences of their refugee journeys including the following three vignettes. Two vignettes are followed by two images drawn by students – one in Kakuma Refugee Camp and one in Sudan.

1. A Year 9 student remembered, "When I was in Kenya in a place called Kakuma Refugee Camp, we went to school but the problem was this, girls don't study because they are always busy fetching water and doing other work. This is UN canteen. It is a place that refugees are given their food. It is really dangerous here when people are going to take maize, etc. because people fight, Kenyan police cane children for no reason and also the weather is hot."



2. A Year 10 student worked in a shop in Cairo. He drew a detailed pencil drawing of himself behind the shop counter and a car and tall building nearby. Then he added text, "I worked with my friend in this shop but I am not happy because I got \$30 and my friend got \$50. He was Egyptian."
3. Another Year 10 student shared his memories of looking after cattle in Sudan, where he did not have time to go to school. He then added, "When I came to Kenya and started to go to school and in year one that is my first time to begin the school." He was 17 at the time.



Many had an experience of school, though by no means was it consistent. Refugee camps feature as places of continuous transition – students remember heat, boredom, corruption, flies, lack of food and water. Many older boys were treated poorly if they went to urban centres. While they were supported as refugees, they did not possess the necessary funds to pay school fees and were forced to work in inequitable conditions. Girls had household and family obligations that compromised their ability to attend school, particularly in the refugee camps. A few boys had never been to school. Their education was outside a formal school setting. Many students also remembered schools in

their homelands – notably Sudan and Sierra Leone – as pleasant places full of colour. It is the forced exodus from their homes that compromises consistency and security. These experiences can adversely affect students' transition to school in Australia and the ability to acquire skills to negotiate school.

IEC to secondary school

High school students noted that the transition from IEC to secondary school was perhaps the most difficult since they had arrived in Australia. This, they elaborated, was for a number of reasons, but learning yet another new school structure, becoming a new student yet again, and learning skills and classroom activities in the context of high school (which were reported as different from those in an IEC) were challenges. So, too, was the structure and speed at which they were expected to cope and adjust to classroom and curricular activities.

One IEC teacher had the following reflection – in particular learning the processes and structure of *group work* (an activity many students said they liked) – about difficulties students might face in the transition to high school.

...but a lot of the other students, it's...I don't know how they'll cope with anything they do. And that will be really hard for them. I mean, they've identified that as something that they love, and when they get to high school it might be something that really intimidates them (IEC teacher).

In general students found the transition between schools hard: work is intensified, there is a change in transport, and the age problem (older students not being allowed to attend high school). The research highlighted divergent experiences across the three schools. The IEC students were generally positive about their schools and felt a sense of community and belonging to a tightly knit group of peers. Nearly all the students were of Southern Sudanese background, with the majority belonging to the Dinka group. They shared a lot in common and all knew of each other's families. In contrast with the larger and more multicultural high school setting, the IEC context is something of a safe space from which students can begin their schooling again. However, some IEC students did speak of Australian-born high school students singling them out (at recess and lunch time) in the school playground and putting them down with comments such as 'dumb IECs who 'can't speak English'.

The high school students spoke more about fighting and dealing with racism. The high school students provided numerous examples of playground bullying. Their experiences highlight the difficulties of making the transition from the IEC environment to the high school setting. Our research suggests this is a major area of difficulty. High school students spoke of friends from their earlier time at IEC who later 'dropped out' of high school because they were unhappy. Some of these students had done very well at an IEC.

We investigated what students considered their non-African peers thought about them. Their responses ran across a spectrum of stereotypes about Africans held by their non-African peers. The following selected statements indicate the range of pejorative responses:

'They think we looking different'
'Some of them think that we are all the same'
'People think that African people don't know how to speak English and also they are different from normal people'
'Cannot attain a degree since their lifes are full of fight on streets'
'The other students think that students from Africa know nothing about school.'
'They think we too poor'

Contrasting these were responses which indicated a fascination with imagined archetypal African physical traits:

'They think our hair is cool'
'They want to dance like us'
'Some people think that Africans are cool, good at basketball and soccer'
'They think we can jump very high'
'They think we are good looking'

In summary, we found that students enjoy intercultural contact and were quite accustomed to it before they entered Australian schools. Many years spent in refugee camps and large urban centers such as Cairo have ensured the normalizing of difference. In other words, cultural difference has become somewhat incidental. Similarly schools should endeavor to normalize difference without imposing 'harmony' upon their student community.

The high school students said that high schools need to make it easier for new African students moving from IEC who feel anxious, often have no friends and are confused by the different buildings and rooms. As one student complained: 'I don't like changing classes with different subjects ... I get lost'. The transition from IEC to high school is significant for recently arrived young Africans. Students repeatedly said that teachers were important in their learning and ultimate adjustment to life in Australia. The following section explores key findings about teachers and parents/guardians perspectives on transitions.

Transitions – Teacher and Parent/Guardian Perspectives

Students have big dreams and great expectations about education and school, and they see teachers as playing a key role in helping them achieve their goals. Education was often mentioned by students as a crucial part of their transition to Australia. Fittingly, an important theme of this research focused on teachers and their experiences with African students in their schools and classrooms. As one teacher mentioned, "I think one of the basic things of an interpersonal relationship between teacher and student is just an acceptance of them as ordinary kids."

Teachers are aware of the background of trauma for students and the variety of behavioral responses to trauma, transition, and new life in Australia. Similarly, the theme of interrupted schooling has emerged as a general issue of concern for teachers, and how teachers can develop expectations of and support those students. Teachers are concerned about their African students and their progress and eventual pathways to the future. The

acquisition of a second language, English, is a major issue, though students in primary schools, particularly Years K-2, seem to be able to learn more quickly simply because they are not too far behind other students who have also just recently started school and are themselves learning the system.

Some teachers acknowledge that the relationship they have with the students is important in terms of emotional as well as curricular support. One IEC teacher said "...and they said also that they felt more comfortable with teachers they like than a new counselor they don't really know. So we do have a role to play". It should be emphasized, however, that students may have psychological issues that need to be dealt with by professional psychologists such as school counselors or counselors from support services such as the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS).

The compound 'parents/guardians' is used purposefully. Although some students live with their mother and father, among the participants in our study it was more common for families to be headed by single mothers (typically widows). At the same time, probably one quarter of the young people who participated in our project are orphans. Some students said they lived independently or moved between relatives' houses. This was particularly the case with older students. One student claimed to be homeless. Seven younger students said they lived with their aunts and/ or older siblings. Apart from the orphans, there are the young people who have experienced conflict within their families since arriving in Australia and now live independently.

The absence of adult males in families was frequently raised by the teachers and parents/guardians whom we surveyed. One teacher described the difficulties:

You've got female-headed families in a male-dominated society [Southern Sudanese community], which means that a lot of the problems are at home because the kids are acting out to mum, and there's no adult male at all there ... Sometimes I think the problems are just so big for these mums. And on top of that we're saying "This kid's got problems at school" (IEC teacher)

Another teacher emphasised the absence of fathers:

If you have a look at our students' families, there is a handful that have got a father figure in the family. It's just mum and the kids. I think we have one or two families that have got a mother and father and the rest ... there's hardly any that have a father (IEC teacher)

One of the key challenges for schools is to develop partnerships with parents/guardians and their communities in their local area. This is vital because parents/guardians (especially single mothers) will often look to community members for assistance when dealing with schools. The parents/guardians who participated in this study said they were eager to know about their children's progress at school and to establish relationships with teachers. They want to play a role and were very concerned about their children's behaviour at schools. In the primary school context, most considered the classroom teacher the most important contact in the school. However, in the high school context, where the student has various teachers, they felt there was no recognizable teacher contact.

Some high school staff were frustrated by an apparent absence of participation from African parents/guardians in extra-curricular school activities such as Harmony Day. A few put this down to a lack of interest on the part of the African parents. As one high school teacher complained:

We have found a lot of the parents don't want to come. Some of the parents we're trying to get up to school, we're working with the counselors and things to try and get them to come and talk to us ... and they don't want to come. (High School teacher)

We asked parents/guardians what they considered the biggest challenge faced by their children as they entered schools in Australia. Responses were:

'language itself'

'English'

'they are losing their mother tongue and not learning good English'

'a new environment'

'African kids and Australian kids discriminating'

'very different cultural backgrounds'

'lots of homework'

'school discipline is different and new'

We also asked parents/guardians about transitions between schools (such as IEC or Primary School to High School). What difficulties did their children face in those changes? Responses were:

'change of transport'

'the age problem'

'older students found it hard being put in a Year 10 class because of their age'

'the work got much harder'

'not understanding a big school system'

The 'age problem' and older students being put in senior year levels because of their age was of special concern to parents/guardians. In some instances, the transition from IEC to high school was too difficult for older children with interrupted schooling or no previous schooling. Parents/guardians felt unable to assist their children with homework because they have very basic English skills and no formal education. The parents/guardians highlighted the need for explicit support during the transitions from primary to high school, from IEC to high school, and from high school to further education and/or work.

Conclusion

We have emphasized the shift to a changed cultural space that African young people variously experience when they arrive in Australia. Of course this is not unique to African young people, other refugees and migrants have similar experiences. However, at least in relation to the young people who participated in our study, their adverse educational and traumatic backgrounds combine to present a new magnitude of incoherence in terms of belonging among refugee young people in the changing urban

Australian context. The African young peoples' experiences of transition in our study call attention to the need for integrated approaches toward settlement which focus not only upon the transition to schools, but also consider the longer term participation of refugee young people in their new society. The challenge is to facilitate the transition from refugees into participating citizens, and schools have a key role to play.

As has been talked about at length in dealing with transitions, the issue of adolescence and what it means for some young Africans in Australia presents hindrances in engaging in particular curricular activities. Because of interrupted schooling, childhood development concepts and concepts about school – intrinsic activities and learning patterns acquired by students who have spent either all or most of their schooling years in the Australian system – had not been taught to or acquired by many of the young African refugees in this study. This is a complex issue that connects formal learning, community, and western notions of adolescence.

In our research, teachers, students and parents all acknowledged that the refugee journey could make settlement in Australia and adjustment to schooling difficult. In this context, several recommendations for working with recently arrived African young people arise from our research. Firstly, these issues could be addressed by improving interaction between the communities and the schools, by utilizing peer support and buddy systems and by linking the communities with refugee support services. By this we mean recognizing that communal approaches toward working with young people are most effective—not only through ethnic community organizations, but also through peer mentoring groups and sustained opportunities for debriefing about traumatic experiences in the past. While communal outlooks are valued by many of these young people, some may not have any close contacts within their communities or families. Opportunities and peer mentoring need to link young people with others who have been in Australia for longer periods of time and who know how to access resources for support.

Teachers play a key role for the African students in terms of reaching their educational goals. With this in mind, we recommend that teachers endeavor to participate in networks where they can share their experiences with other teachers. In this way, a knowledge base can be built to assist teachers in working with African students experiencing various phases of transition in schools. Building relationships between students and teachers is important.

Overall, schools need to play a proactive role. Holding a forum to meet with parents in a safe environment and using a language they are familiar with is a good start. It is not enough to wait for parents/guardians to contact schools because they usually will not do so. Meeting with parents would provide a resource and back-up for teachers when needed. Respected community members can act as cultural mediators who may be informally and formally called upon from time-to-time to assist with problems as they arise. In Blacktown, our consultations with parents, guardians and adult community members highlighted an eager desire on their part to work in partnership with schools.

Many of our participants' goals were filled with high hopes, dreams, and expectations of themselves. Shifting space and cultural place occurs for many refugee young people at school. With the tremendous challenges involved in the transition process, recommending opportunities for students, teachers and communities to connect through schools is an important first step.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Schooling is compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 15 years in NSW. Newly arrived high school students are able to attend one of 15 Intensive English Centres (IEC's) in Sydney and Wollongong. The IEC's enable students to engage in intensive English tuition before entering mainstream high school. The course – English Preparation for High School – lasts 20 weeks and introduces students to the Australian high school system and teaching practices (NSW DET, 2004).