

Navigating the Localised Realities of the Refugee Education Polycscape: The case of a regional Australian secondary school

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Australia participates in the international trend of dispersal of refugees and asylum seekers into rural and regional areas. This regionalisation of humanitarian resettlement has been deployed for decades and is situated around two key rationales: a) resettling populations can rejuvenate rural areas facing socioeconomic decline; and b) metropolitan centres would benefit from a decrease in populations requiring support (DoHA, 2019). However, reviews into regional resettlement found that while regional areas can be quieter, safer and more accessible for refugee-background families, major challenges remain in the material, social and economic conditions required to facilitate successful settlement (Piper, 2017). Furthermore, existing rural refugee education research suggests that while schools are under-resourced, under-supported and unfamiliar in the provision of refugee education, they are often the primary sites of support for refugee-background students in difficult community contexts (Colvin, 2017; Cuervo, 2016; Wilkinson & Langat, 2012).

This paper explores data from a multi-phase examination of the educational impact of dispersal policies. We report a case study of how one regional Australian secondary school is managing these complex conditions. Drawing from qualitative data including school tours and interviews with staff and leaders, we engaged the work of Ball et al. (2012) to explore the multi-positioning of school staff as simultaneously the unconsulted receivers of departmental, state and federal policies; and the experienced developers and enactors of localised policy and practice. The work of Mettler (2016) helps understand the complex ‘polycscape’ of refugee education in Australia and how school-level policy actors are constrained or enabled by policy or the absence of it. This paper identifies the ways in which school-level policy actors navigate the complex and ‘misaligned’ state and federal systems (Savage & O’Connor, 2018, p. 816) to creatively respond to for refugee student needs within their local context.

The case study school indicated that while Federal policies of dispersal may have socioeconomic benefits, the local conditions in regional areas require schools to engage in a complex process of policy navigation and negotiation in the education of refugee-background students. These findings contribute to a long-term critique of the refugee education polycscape, primarily reflecting the ‘piecemeal’ approach to refugee education at all levels of governance (Matthews, 2008). This paper argues that regional schools in Australia continue to contend with nuanced local realities in order to provide refugee education, and Federal policies of dispersal must adequately consider local realities and conditions required for the successful settlement of refugee students.