

What's Fair?: Schools' struggles with educationally just, equal and equitable responses to refugee education

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As a counter to the deficit and homogenized understandings that have dominated refugee education in Australia, socially just practices which seek to increase participation and attainment through recognizing the diverse and complex experiences and skills of refugee students are gaining increasing prominence in research and practice. Schools are able to access dedicated funding and specialized support staff that allow them to identify and respond to the complex needs of students from refugee backgrounds, minimizing the educational disparity between refugee students and their peers. In highly complex school environments, educators are faced with the difficult dilemma of choosing how these dedicated resources are distributed. Equally distributing resources across the student cohort ensures all students are given *equality of opportunity*, ignoring the issue of who needs it most, while in contrast, allocating resources to attain *equity of outcome* is contingent upon those resources being distributed unequally, contradicting some notions of what can be considered 'fair'. In this paper we explore how educators navigate the paradoxical notion of fairness.

This paper presents data from a large multi-stage study which explored educational policies and school practices that shape the schooling experiences for students from refugee backgrounds. The data was obtained as part of phase two of the study, and involved focused ethnographic research in seven secondary schools identified as examples of 'good practice' in refugee education. Data intensive visits to each of the school sites were undertaken using a combination of interactive walking tours and semi-structured interviews with school leaders and selected staff. In total, 53 staff members were interviewed across the 7 schools.

The findings suggest that educators struggled to navigate the tension between providing an equal or equitable response for students from refugee backgrounds, and often these struggles were inextricably tied to student and funding contexts. Many educators found it difficult to weigh up the seemingly competing forms of disadvantage when allocating resourcing and support, frequently opting to distribute resources in a way which favoured equality of opportunity for all students. Contrastingly, in schools with higher levels of funding and less socioeconomic disadvantage, resources were more likely to be allocated directly towards students from refugee backgrounds, thereby aiming for equity of outcome. This paper explores the complex negotiations that school staff and leaders undertook in allocating resources and how these processes aligned with, or in some cases contradicted, core notions of fairness and social justice.