



MDA

Multicultural Development
Association

**Education Green paper – ‘A Flying Start for Queensland
Children’**

Submission by the Multicultural Development Association Inc. (MDA)
30 June 2010



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Introduction

The Multicultural Development Association Inc. (MDA) is a lead specialist settlement, advocacy and community development organisation with highly respected credentials in the provision of services to refugees and a strong organisational track record in systemic advocacy for the last 10 years. We are currently part of a consortium with 4 Walls (a community housing provider) and QPASTT (Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma) which delivers a range of settlement services for refugees and migrants.

MDA’s advocacy work over recent years has included the development of an innovative series of advocacy strategies designed to achieve outcomes which ensure that relevant stakeholders such as service providers, government agencies, political representatives, industry, business and community sector organisations have an appreciation of the issues relating to refugees and migrants. The aim is to raise awareness and to advocate for change in regards to systemic issues which affect successful settlement and inclusion in the community.

MDA’s newly renamed Advocacy and Social Policy unit is part of a state wide advocacy network that is funded by Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ) through its Community Action for a Multicultural Society (CAMS) program. The unit consists of four Advocacy Worker positions and our work is further enhanced by MDA through an injection of its own resources, volunteers and student interns.

We are pleased to contribute to the State Government’s Education Green paper which was released earlier this year for public consultation. This submission provides important background information on issues that students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, particularly refugee students and their families, have experienced. Feedback is also provided on two main questions contained in the discussion paper regarding how these initiatives can assist our students and their families as well as providing support for teachers.

As MDA is funded to work on systemic issues for African communities through its African advocacy position, this submission primarily reflects their experiences. However the issues raised can be comparable to all new and emerging refugee communities that are settling in Queensland and can be modelled to engage refugee youth from other backgrounds.

Over the past five years nearly 33,000 people from Africa were granted visas under Australia’s humanitarian program. Over 5,000 of these have resettled in Queensland which is 75% of all

refugees resettled in Queensland during this period.¹ Accordingly, a significant proportion of MDA’s clients over the last five years are from African nations. Table 1 below shows the breakdown of our client groups that are being serviced by MDA.²

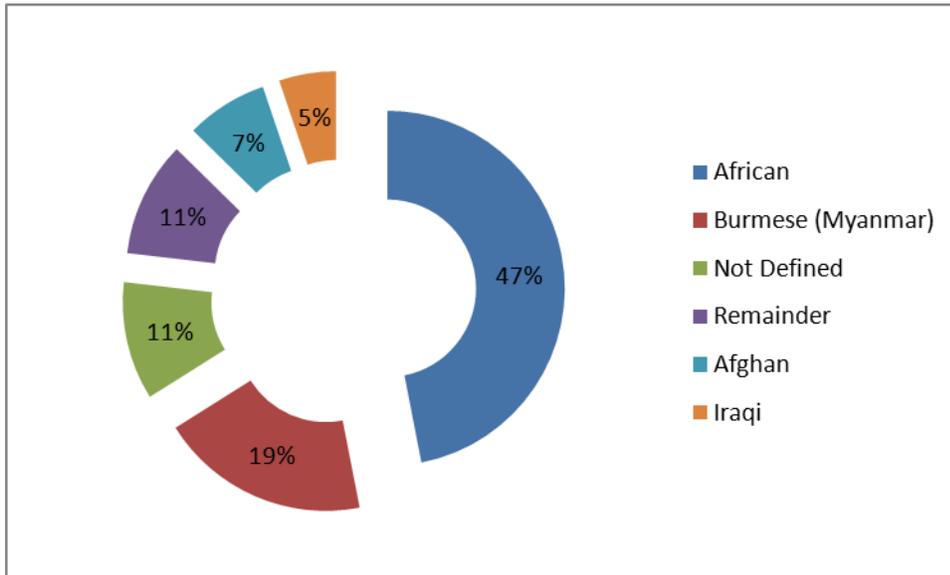


Table 1: *Cultural composition of client caseload*

We are advised that young African refugee students in Queensland experience a far greater risk of leaving the state education system in Queensland earlier than their counterparts. While no quantitative data exists to support this, anecdotal data from community leaders, young African people who have left school, teachers, multicultural and mainstream service providers in Brisbane, Toowoomba and north Queensland have all voiced concerns with retention issues of African students.

MDA believes that these background issues should be taken into consideration for planning or implementing any educational strategies to assist all new and emerging refugee communities who are settling in Queensland. We hope that this will assist in providing a snapshot of how the development of proper educational strategies can assist young refugee students in their settlement process and to empower them to become fully participating members in an inclusive system.

¹ Department of Immigration and Citizenship figures contained in *New Futures: The Queensland Government’s Engagement with African Refugees*, 2008.

² Data from MDA, Continuing Settlement Services as at 29 June 2010.

Barriers to education for refugee youth

Previous consultations with participants from African communities in Brisbane and Toowoomba have identified the following issues which impact significantly on young African refugees.

Language proficiency

Language is often the major settlement issue as it is the catalyst to effective communication, vocational and employment pathways and successful settlement into the broader community. Many African young people arrive with some English language proficiency but this differs depending on prior opportunities provided to study English before arriving in Australia. It is MDA's experience that some African young people often have higher English language proficiency than other groups of humanitarian or refugee entrants but still experience significant difficulty within the education system.

Other African students may be illiterate or have low levels of literacy in their first language which impedes the learning of English as a second language. This is especially evident where some African cultures primarily have an oral culture. Research indicates that it can take two years for second language learners to become fluent in basic interpersonal communication, but between four to seven years to gain academic English proficiency. For refugee students with disrupted schooling some studies suggest it takes up to ten years to acquire academic proficiency.³ Anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents is that many refugee students struggle with communication with teachers, assignment work, exams, working in groups and generally coping with the structure and expectations within a classroom setting.

Regardless of their language proficiency, many African students have received little or no formal schooling prior to their arrival in Australia. Due to their refugee experiences many students have experienced disruption to their education and trauma in their home countries and/or refugee camps. Many have spent long periods in refugee camps, suffered from torture and trauma and are affected by the loss of family members. These experiences can have a lasting and profound effect on their ability to settle and integrate into the school system life in Queensland.

Appropriateness of age based education

The language barrier also sits within a broader problem of age appropriate based education. A percentage of African refugees MDA consulted have had extremely disrupted education, often missing years of school at a time due to war or strife in their home country, or extended periods of time in refugee camps. Upon arrival in Australia, they are placed in a grade appropriate to their age, rather than their level of education. This means the syllabus covered can be several grade levels beyond their current ability, which puts major barriers in front of students before they even begin. This is a contentious issue in that the education system in Australia is age

³ Miller J, Mitchell J and Brown J, (2005), *African refugees with interrupted schooling in the high school mainstream: Dilemmas for teachers*. Prospect Journal: An Australian Journal of TESOL, 20 (2), 19-33.

based. MDA believe that this is an important consideration which must be taken into account in the development of any education policy in relation to refugee students.

The language difficulty does not end in the classroom. When socialising with other students, some African students feel isolated and ignored, due to their problems communicating effectively. Combined with the frustration of falling behind in classes due to undeveloped English skills, this can lead to students acting out and misbehaving out of embarrassment or frustration. Consultations revealed that students regularly become disengaged with the schooling process. This has seen a worrying number of students dropping out of the system.

Comprehensive ESL policy

Our consultations have advised that the education system and curriculum in Queensland has not been adequately developed to meet the complex needs of students with vastly different educational experiences. The learning needs of refugees differ significantly from most other students. While the Commonwealth funds each state to deliver English as a Second Language (ESL) at various schools, there was vocal concern that ESL courses to date have been implemented in an ad-hoc fashion and has been insufficient and unable to address the learning needs of many refugee students.

MDA were pleased to contribute to the feedback and consultation process in the development of Queensland Education's first draft ESL policy in December 2009. However, to date there has been no feedback on its implementation or progress or how it will seek to address the ESL needs of CALD and refugee students.

MDA believes that underpinning any strategy for education in Queensland must be a formalised refugee policy and ESL policy to fully address the needs of CALD and refugee students. Victoria is an example which has fully established policies for refugee students and provides solid resources on multicultural issues for Victorian schools.

What support could be provided to help families give their children a flying start to school?

Many parents involved in our consultations have raised concerns about the lack of progress and the inability of the current education system to address the needs of their children. They believe that this has prevented many students from becoming active participants and contributors in activities and programs. MDA is pleased to see a commitment by the State Government in its 2010-11 budget priorities towards educational outcomes, in particular its reference to \$25.8 million to boost literacy and numeracy skills. However, we will keep a watching brief on how this initiative will address the special needs of vulnerable groups and how the implementation of the ESL policy factors into this strategy.

The Green paper makes specific reference to the positive contribution that parents make in the education and development of their children. We would like to highlight the challenges that many families from refugee backgrounds that have little or no education may have in supporting their children. A compounding factor is the lack of English language proficiency for many parents themselves who may be learning English for the first time and also for a percentage of parents who are illiterate in their own language. This means that many parents may have difficulties in understanding the curriculum and may struggle to assist their children with homework in English.

MDA believes that programs such as the volunteer reading programs across the State are very important and worthwhile initiatives which would be a useful resource for many CALD students and their families. Therefore, it is crucial that any programs to benefit CALD students, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, must take these factors into consideration. Support programs assisting families and their children must be specifically targeted. It is also crucial that these programs be adequately funded and resourced with culturally competent staff, proper use of interpreters, cultural teacher aides or cultural support workers.

Access to Interpreting services

Interpreting services are particularly important in engaging students and their parents in the education system. However, many schools have advised they do not engage interpreters when communicating with parents. The approach and framework of engagement with refugee and CALD students and their families with state schools is largely dependent on the management of the school and the application of these frameworks by individual classroom teachers. State schools vary considerably in their methodology when engaging with refugee and CALD students and families. Consultations have revealed that there are still incidents where a clear break down in communication partnered with structural, social and cultural assumptions have resulted in negative outcomes for refugee and CALD students and their families.

Case study 1

An example of this is clearly evidenced in a recent series of events which occurred at a school where a Grade Two teacher reprimanded a student from a refugee background for failing to meet standards set out in a behavioural contract, which the school assumed was fully understood and agreed to by all parties involved. This resulted in the student being unable to participate in a school excursion.

This is a clear example where students are penalised due to the lack of employing adequate interpreting services to assist both students and families understand rules and regulations.

The uptake of usage of interpreters by teachers is unknown. The Queensland Government Language Services Policy does not currently appear on the website for the Department of

Education, Training and the Arts, but MDA is of the understanding that policies are currently being reviewed at present.

Translated materials

MDA believe that consideration should be given (if it has not already) to translating available reading materials for CALD and refugee students. This is particularly pertinent given that the State Government have signaled the intention to roll out an awareness campaign with relevant information to assist each family with children. There appears to be no multilingual information available to assist communication between schools and parents.

While many may be illiterate in their native language, many African people are able to access community members or agencies which will assist with the interpretation of the written material. The Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Childhood Development have a range of publications in community languages, including information on English as a Second Language and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards to assist parents understand the Victorian education system.

Therefore, it is crucial that any programs to benefit students from culturally and linguistically (CALD) backgrounds, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, must take these factors into consideration. Support programs assisting families and their children must be specifically targeted. It is also crucial that these programs be adequately funded and resourced with culturally competent staff, proper use of interpreters and cultural appropriate teacher aides.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

That Queensland Education ensures that schools with the highest needs are well resourced with culturally competent volunteers and appropriate reading materials that are translated into a range of languages.

Recommendation 2:

Ensure those volunteers who are recruited:

- includes qualified people from CALD (including from refugee) backgrounds;
- are culturally competent in order to understand the needs of students from diverse background.

Recommendation 3:

Ensure mandatory compliance by all State schools with the Queensland Government's Language Services Policy to enable the engagement of interpreters for parents from NESB. Further, multiple channels for complaints (not limited merely to online complaints procedures) should be



implemented to better enable parents and guardians from NESB to lodge complaints if the schools fail to provide them with interpreters. For example, complaint forms and information about complaint procedures, with prepaid self addressed envelopes, should be provided;

Recommendation 4:

That the implementation of any strategy in regards to students from CALD/refugee background be done in consultation with key stakeholders like MDA.

What are the most important aspects of education that must be included in teachers' preservice training?

Cultural competence for teachers

Participants have reported the inconsistent professional development training provided to teachers across the State. It would seem that professional development opportunities can be limited or ad hoc and there is currently no formal training program in place which has been designed to assist teachers in working with refugees. Those teachers who do avail themselves of professional development training (outside of the Department) tend to be those who have an interest in refugee issues, work in high refugee population schools or are in partnerships with local multicultural agencies.

Raising awareness on the special needs of refugees and other humanitarian entrants

Previous incidents of torture and trauma impact significantly on most refugees in their resettlement journey. Stakeholder consultations reveal that it is common to hear of some behaviors from students which are of concern for communities and teachers.

Case study 2:

A Sudanese refugee community worker in Brisbane recounted events back in some parts of South Sudan when the war intensified, there were often situations where children were unexpectedly and violently taken out from the classroom. They may have been in class when they saw their teacher (and or siblings and friends) being shot and then protected themselves by playing 'dead'. This behavior could be the flashbacks of situations they might have experienced or witnessed, and this was how they protected themselves.

Examples like this show that our teachers need to understand the background of why behavior like this occurs and how best to approach and address the situation.

There is some literature that suggests that it is not advisable to assume that torture and trauma effects are the prima facie basis of educational interventions, as this is presenting a 'deficit' and

‘intervention’ model as opposed to one which builds on strengths and resilience.⁴ Evidence suggests that children respond in different ways to trauma than adults which is a critical distinction to make, especially in the learning context. However the impact of racism and its profound impact on acculturation, well-being and mental health also increase a refugee young person’s vulnerability.⁵

Through MDA’s experiences, teachers have often commented on the courage and resilience of refugee young people. The following quote from a recent report into schooling and settlement for refugees captures the importance of building on the student’s strengths to assist with their sense of self-worth, hope and learning environments.

“The thing with working with refugee youth is that they are resilient and strong survivors, they have a lot of strategies and strengths....They come to school every day, sometimes they have a long journey. They don’t give up - they never give up.....They work really hard. They value education very much. All of these things set them for success if there weren’t other difficulties - like the lack of schooling. Even the English language difficulties can be overcome. It’s the lack of schooling”⁶.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 5:

Provide mandatory and improved cross-cultural training to school principals, teachers, and administration staff to assist them in performing their duties in a culturally appropriate manner. Appropriate procedures to monitor compliance by schools with cross-cultural training should also be implemented. Cross-cultural training should also be provided as part of the university curriculum for teachers and education providers, as well as ongoing professional development in cross-cultural issues

Recommendation 6:

That teachers need to be resourced and trained in dealing with a cohort of students who have experienced extraordinary trauma.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the key issues presented above provide an insight into what the special needs are for refugee students. A failure to develop strategies to address these needs will only serve to

⁴ Matthews Julie, (2008) Schooling and settlement: refugee education in Australia International Studies in Sociology of Education, 18:1 31-45

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid



marginalise and isolate refugee students further. The State Government's vision in its *Toward' Q2, Tomorrow's Queensland* strategy on education seeks to deliver world class education and training by providing Queensland students with the best start to learning and life. We believe that this must also provide a platform for students who have higher needs.

For many refugee and migrant families, education is paramount to ensuring a successful future. MDA supports a holistic approach to African refugee education whereby families, communities and schools work collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for the student, whether this is for tertiary preparation or a vocational career. We believe that refugee young people in Queensland deserve an education which addresses their education, learning and social needs in a supportive and responsive school environment.