

Book reviews

REFUGEE BACKGROUND STUDENTS TRANSITIONING INTO HIGHER EDUCATION: NAVIGATING COMPLEX SPACES

*Loshini Naidoo, Jane Wilkinson, Misty Adoniou,
& Kiprono Langat*

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Skye Playsted

TAFE Southwest Queensland

With 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (UNHCR, 2018), and with controversial political debates and policy decisions about refugees occurring in developed countries including Australia, the publication of *Refugee Background Students Transitioning into Higher Education: Navigating Complex Spaces* may be considered timely. For educators working with students from a refugee background, this well-researched book provides a challenging and comprehensive resource that sheds light on the complex issues surrounding the refugee journey into and through the Australian education system.

The book draws on a two year longitudinal study, the School-University Pathways Project for Refugee Students (SUPRS) (Naidoo et al., 2015), which documented the experiences and issues faced by young university students and secondary students from refugee backgrounds who were making the transition to higher education in Australia. Students, teachers, school principals, university teaching staff and support staff across three educational regions in NSW and the ACT were interviewed as part of the study. Insights from such a wide range of experiences and sources provide the book with a sound evidence base.

Challenges faced in conducting the SUPRS study are acknowledged in the book's introduction, including "complex external factors" (p. xx) of students' different backgrounds, prior life experiences and social, political and geographic contexts; and the challenge of designing a project which would be "readily and reliably generalisable" (p. xx) given such differentiation. Thus, while an overall case study approach was taken, the researchers

employed a broad interpretivist research methodology to examine participants' accounts. Qualitative data gathered through focus groups, and both conversational-style and semi-structured interviews was interpreted using a critical discourse analysis. The book's eight chapters explore in detail the themes which emerged from the project, namely: prior life experience, language, social capital, an enabling learning culture, politics, policy and identification and transition.

In the first three chapters, Loshini Naidoo sets out the broad context in which the book's themes are situated. Statistics are highlighted which show the small percentage of refugee settlement in Australia and the OECD, compared with the number of people facing forcible displacement from their countries. A review of research conducted in Australia, the USA, the UK, South Africa and Afghanistan is included in this first chapter. Key theoretical and philosophical perspectives on social justice, human rights, equity and critical theory are briefly outlined. Chapter three emphasises the need for educators and policymakers to understand the causes of forced migration worldwide, and the complexity which schools and universities face in forming responses to the needs of the young people from refugee backgrounds.

Following these scene-setting chapters, Misty Adoniou foregrounds the prior life experiences and narratives of young refugee background students who participated in the SUPRS study. Their journeys are recorded in this book by researchers who clearly have a longstanding practical engagement with refugee communities and education in Australia. The onus is appropriately placed on university educators and support staff to acknowledge and understand every student's unique background and future aspirations, rather than make "broad assumptions" (p. 62) which can see prior life experiences as problems to be solved. These should instead be viewed as assets which can contribute academically and socially to a university's culture.

Jane Wilkinson focuses in chapter five on the "enablers and barriers" (p. 70) for refugee youth in schools transitioning into higher education. Educational policy, funding, resourcing, curriculum restrictions, provision of specialist EAL/D teacher training and a case study of a regional NSW high school are examined, as well as the need for a whole-school approach in order to support successful academic transitions for refugee students. The theme of aspiration identified in this chapter

continues through chapter six as the focus shifts from schools to universities. Refugee students' high aspirations and perceptions of the skills they possess as assets are contrasted with views of university educators and support staff who see these students as "deficient or lacking" (p. 100).

The next chapter addresses the role language plays in "getting into and through university" (p. 107). This will be of particular interest to TESOL and literacy educators dealing with "English language proficiency" frameworks in schools and universities. This chapter looks at the benefits of discipline-specific language and literacy support, TESOL-trained teachers and the incorporation of existing cultural and language knowledge through bilingual support programmes.

Kiprono Langat then highlights the "hidden but crucially important role" (p. 131) which community organisations and networks play in positively engaging refugee youth and supporting their integration into new learning environments. Collaboration and partnerships between community and education institutions are suggested as strategies which will promote a holistic approach to successful higher education transition for refugee background students.

Overall, the book achieves its aim of demonstrating that successful transition into higher education for refugee background youth is "a process, not an outcome" (p. 157). It recommends that universities develop a more holistic approach to the support of refugee youth negotiating their unique journeys into and through higher education.

While the research in the book focuses on data collected in Australia, the issues raised are relevant to a broader international audience. Interview excerpts of mainstream and EAL/D teachers, principals and support staff in schools and universities will resonate with those who are working in (or aspire to work in) such roles. Students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels will find this book helpful as a contemporary resource which provides valuable insights into human rights, equity and social justice in education. Teachers of English as an additional language in ELICOS, EAP, AMEP and university courses, as well as those involved in community programs will find in this book a well-researched and thorough discussion of the complex challenges which their refugee background students face.

The hardcover price of \$120 (USD) may put this book in a price range accessible for purchase by institutional libraries rather

than individual students, although it is available as an e-book for \$89 (USD).

References

- Naidoo, L., Wilkinson, J., Langat, K., Adoniou, M., Cunneen, R., & Bolger, D. (2015). "Case study report: Supporting school-university pathways for refugee students' access and participation in tertiary education". Report funded by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. University of Western Sydney, Kingswood, NSW, Australia.
- UNHCR. (2018). *Figures at a glance*. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/figures-at-a-glance.html>