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# EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF PRACTITIONERS ON THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG REFUGEES SETTLING IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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## Introduction

Across the world large numbers of people are displaced every year and seek asylum in other countries. For example, in 2010 '...there were an estimated 43.7 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 15.4 million refugees, 837 500 asylum seekers and 27.5 million internally displaced persons' (Phillips, 2011, p. 1). This number is increasing with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees stating that there are currently over 52 million refugees and displaced people worldwide (UNCHR, 2016). The number of refugees settled in Australia is comparatively small—in the five-year period, 2011-2015, 70,721 humanitarian refugees were settled in Australia (Department of Social Services, 2017c).

This paper focuses on the findings of a qualitative exploratory study examining the perceptions of professionals working with young refugees resettled in Townsville, a regional city in northern Australia with a population of just under 200,000. Themes presented include emotional well-being, adapting to a new environment, schooling experience, and living in poorer areas.

## Background information

Regional settlement of refugees is seen as a strategy to alleviate pressures such as housing affordability and employment opportunities in major metropolitan areas (Refugee Council of Australia [RCA], 2015). Townsville is a regional centre for refugee settlement. In 2011-2015, 531 humanitarian refugees settled there; 64% of these were young people under 25 years of age (Department of Social Services, 2017a). Seventy two percent of refugees were African, with the three top countries of birth (Somalia, Congo and Kenya) constituting 55% of arrivals in Townsville (Department of Social Services, 2017b).

Settlement in regional areas can be particularly successful where there are job opportunities, however, an increased intake of young people through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program raises questions about how refugees are supported to settle in regional areas (Refugee Council of Australia, 2015; Queensland Council of Social Service [QCOSS], 2014).

In regions with limited employment prospects members of the refugee communities 'reported growing frustration and despair at the low level of employment', as well as racism at their places of employment (RCA 2011, p. 2). Meaningful employment is vital to the wellbeing of refugee communities, and periods of economic downturns can see an increase of racism and discrimination (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012). Refugees often face racism and xenophobia within the workplace, and also within the broader community and service sector (Robinson, 2013). Further difficulties that refugees experience in the resettling process in Australia include lack of safe and affordable housing. Factors contributing to this include financial hardship, discrimination in the housing market and lack of social and community capital (RCA, 2013). Townsville is one of three Queensland regions targeted by the Australian Government for regional humanitarian settlement (QCOSS, 2014). Refugees who

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arrived in Townsville faced a median rent of \$340 in 2012 and an unemployment rate of 5.2%. However, while the total employment rate in the region was 74%, the employment rate for overseas non-English speaking people was lower, at 69.6% (QCOSS, 2014).

Despite a steady increase in refugees world-wide, there is comparatively scant research focusing on refugee youths (Tinkler, 2006). A high proportion of refugees in Australia are children and young people under 20 years of age (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture [VFST], 2012); in Townsville 282 refugees arriving in 2011-2015 were aged 18 or younger (Department of Social Services, 2017a). Tinkler (2006, p.2) suggests that refugees represent highly diverse backgrounds, yet face unique problems in their new countries of residence due to factors such as 'language barriers, differing cultural values, prejudice, and trauma from violent conditions in their home country.'

Although there is a limited body of Australian research exploring refugee youth settlement experiences, an early Australian study highlighted that resettlement was a complex process for young people and involved learning about new cultures, expectations and language (Lim, 1979). Another study undertaken with young Sudanese refugees highlighted numerous challenges in terms of adaptation to the school system, social adaptation and learning of the English language (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). Moreover, while most young refugees arrived from South Sudan, they represented a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds (Miller et al., 2005). A recent Australian metropolitan longitudinal study highlighted challenges for youth refugees including adapting to and completing schooling, family separation, discrimination and social exclusions (Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009). A young refugee's prior schooling experience, levels of self-esteem and social supports impacted their overall wellbeing (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & McMichael, 2015). Gifford et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of providing support for young refugees in their families.

A range of stressors and traumatic events can affect refugee youth: forced conscription, loss of family members and loved ones, exposure to bombing and combat fire, sexual assault, witnessing violence and death, physical injury, arrest, detention, torture and other factors and events (VFST, 2012). Young refugees are often separated from their families due to armed conflict and fleeing to refugee camps in neighbouring countries (Bates et al., 2005). Many refugee youth "...have spent long periods of time in refugee camps or have lived much of their lives in violent and unsettled circumstances" (Gifford et al. 2009, p 20). Stressors can continue when refugee youth settle in a new country and have '...far reaching impacts on social, cognitive and neurological development", including the capacity to learn and the social development (VFST, 2012, p. 69).

Research has highlighted that despite exposure to considerable trauma some refugee youth "...reported considerable evidence of resilience" whereas others reported symptoms of PTSD (Bates et al., 2005, p. 635). Refugees have often experienced severe trauma prior to settling in a new country; however, the settlement experience itself can also affect people's health (VFST, 2012). Gifford et al. found that young refugees suffered chronic health concerns, '... including insomnia, headaches, concerns about body image ... and fatigue' (2009, p. 56). While Torture and Trauma Counselling services are offered by the Department of Health and Aging, the RCA (2015) highlighted a lack of resources and/or responsiveness of these services in non-metropolitan areas such as Townsville.

Factors affecting young refugees' settlement include language barriers, learning difficulties, adjusting to new cultural values, schooling, cultural and social conditions, trauma and prejudice (Tinkler, 2006; Miller et al. 2005). Research with young refugees has identified that they are concerned about education and training, housing, employment and money issues, family issues and access to services (Olliff, 2010). Refugee youth experience numerous challenges in terms of adaptation to the school system, social adaptation and learning of the English language. Challenges include trauma, dislocation, learning difficulties, 'adjustment to a new education system and social conditions...., disabilities, loss family and familiar culture' (Miller, et al., 2005, p. 1).

Educational outcomes are impacted by variables such as disrupted education, different education systems, lack of literacy in their first language, torture and trauma (Olliff, 2010; Miller et al., 2005). For instance, many young refugees from Sudan had 'severely interrupted or no substantive schooling' which necessitates targeted resources to support their learning experience (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006, p. 151). Young refugees reported that adjusting to the school environment was a major challenge, establishing and maintaining school relationship was difficult, and racism and harassment from other students was part of their experience (Bates et al., 2005). Yet, schooling plays an important part in the settlement process of refugee youth (Hek, 2005).

Research suggests that working with refugees can be demanding and stressful work. Professional staff are often exposed to emotionally draining experiences of service users, and are often not prepared for ‘...human rights work, including documenting testimony of torture and trauma’ (Robinson, 2013, p. 1610). The work is often complex, and language issues, cultural difference and prejudice can construct barriers to service provision (Masocha, 2014) and requires ‘... specialist and non-specialist support staff within a mainstream school that recognises and values the experiences of refugees’ (Hek, 2005, p. 168).

Research elsewhere suggests that young refugees across the world bring similar experiences and issues to the settlement process. Research with young refugees from Cuba highlighted the impact of trauma, and in particular, trauma emerging from refugee camp experiences (Rothe, Castillo-Matos & Busquets, 2002). Oduah’s (2003) research with refugees in the United States highlighted the negative impact of the refugee camp experience on young people’s perceptions of the world and that it had a lasting effect on their future lives (2003). Masocha’s (2014) UK research identified the impact of trauma on young people due to forced migration and the difficulty of dealing with language barriers and cultural issues. Research in Europe has stressed the impact of trauma, separation, sexual abuse and the long-lasting impact of displacement, as well as language and cultural difficulties (Hebebrand et al. 2016). Furthermore, young Middle Eastern refugees struggled with discrimination, mental problems and social adaptation as they settled in Denmark (Montgomery & Foldspang, 2007).

In summary, limited research is available about the settlement of young refugees in Australia. Although recent research has engaged with youth refugees exploring factors that impact settlement, the focus of this work has been a large metropolitan area. Other research has considered specific aspects in the settlement process, such as schooling, or has focused on refugees in general to consider the impact of trauma. However, on the whole very little is known about the settlement of young people in regional areas in Australia and the perceptions of service providers about their work with them in these regions.

## **Methodology**

The primary author of this article undertook explorative qualitative research examining the perceptions of a range of professionals working with refugee youth settling in Townsville in 2013-2014. The first author’s own experience as a refugee, his professional work in the social welfare field and a review of literature suggested that youth refugees might experience similar patterns in settlement independent of their ethnic background and/or country of origin. The overall aim of the research was to explore whether there are common patterns in the experiences of youth refugees of different ethnic background.

Participants included high school teachers, social/community workers, bicultural workers, and medical practitioners. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Questions explored participants’ experience of working with young refugees, including what issues they felt young refugees were facing, what they saw as useful and less useful strategies in their professional work with youth refugees, and their suggestions for improved assistance and programs. The interviews were audio recorded and transcripts were sent to interviewees for verification before being analysed.

Data presented has been anonymised and a participant’s profession has not been included. as the community is small and the number of people working in this area is limited. Snowball sampling, professional experience of the researcher and availability of potential participants led to 10 professionals being interviewed in this research. Information was de-identified and a thematic analysis undertaken (Neuman, 2011). The study was undertaken by the first author as part of postgraduate studies and approved by the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee.

## **Findings**

The themes developed through the data analysis are: emotional wellbeing, adapting to the new environment, schooling experience and structural issues. Under those themes the impact of past and present traumatic experiences on refugee youth wellbeing and resilience are explored. The adaptation of young refugees to new environments is explored with particular focus on impacts of cultural identity, family obligations, and language. Structural issues affecting settlement include racism and housing affordability.

## **Emotional wellbeing**

### *Traumatic experiences*

Participants identified the experience of trauma as a major factor in the life of many young refugees. The majority of participants in this study indicated that in their view severe trauma associated with the youth refugees' past experiences had an impact on their current wellbeing. The participants suggested that young people seemed to deal with trauma in diverse ways and showed varied levels of resilience.

Participants reiterated that young people coming from African countries, in particular the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Sudan, had often experienced extremely traumatic events. Numerous examples of how refugee youth were exposed to traumatic events were presented, including being pursued by lions while fleeing, witnessing the death or the torture of family members, walking past dying people and being a boy soldier.

### *Impact of trauma*

*Trauma was seen as impacting many of the refugee youth regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. A number of participants suggested that the refugee youth they were working with suffered from post-traumatic stress disorders, but that this was generally undiagnosed. For example, Professional 5 stated: I am sure they have some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder or something to that effect. One family mentioned that a fire alarm or the dog bark reminds them of something that has happened in the refugee camp because the dog's barking signalled the soldiers coming, or the rebels coming. That is a traumatic experience for them.*

Most participants acknowledged the refugee camp experience in the young refugees' lives. Professional 9's comment summarises the perceptions of most participants in the study:

*Some of them came from backgrounds where they lived quite normal lives until some kind of turmoil or upheaval in their home countries....but that's more an exception than a rule. Most of them are from backgrounds of longer stays in refugee camps.*

It seems that the young peoples' refugee camp experiences varied; however many of them, regardless of the location of the camp or their ethnic or cultural origin stayed in camps for extended periods of time. Professional 5, for instance outlined:

*Some of the young people have been born in a refugee camp..... Occasionally we have some people who have been living in the community..... who haven't been in a refugee camp but that's seldom, on average they are in a refugee camp ten years. Most of them know no life outside refugee camp.*

A number of participants commented on the different ways in which people acknowledged trauma. Professional 6 for instance outlined:

*The students who will talk [about their traumatic experiences] are a minority and they just have a different psychological disposition; perhaps they are more resilient and by talking about it they realise that we are interested and we are not going to condemn them.....So they realise that it's OK to talk about it and perhaps they are the students who don't have terrible nightmares so they are OK to talk about it.*

Participants reflected on the high levels of resilience and survival skills among the young people partaking in the humanitarian settlement process; some also acknowledged the struggle and drive of the young people. Most participants indicated that the young refugees seemed to benefit from being listened to as they talked about their experiences. At the same time a number of participants expressed caution in terms of the necessary professional skills and knowledge and high level of trust that are needed in order to enable the young people to share their experiences.

## **Adapting to the new environment**

Participants recognised that the process of adapting to a new environment was multifaceted. Their discussion raised issues associated with cultural identity and language acquisition. Adapting to the new country emerged as a complex process, where emotional, medical, cultural and other practical issues are interconnected. The complexity is illustrated by a comment made by Professional 5, who highlights the learning and adaptation that needs to happen before people can attend to emotional needs:

*At the beginning they are struggling with settlement... there is so much to learn and then once you have settled down a little bit more emotional issues start coming up. There are actually people that decline to see torture and trauma counsellor at the beginning towards the end they start saying: 'maybe this is a time when I want to see one now'.*

#### *Cultural identity*

The research found that establishing the background of refugees in the area was difficult. Participants pointed out that in some cases the young people represented ethnic minorities in their countries of origin. In those cases, the country of origin may not be the appropriate main factor for establishing their cultural background. Frequently, regardless of their country of origin, refugees spent many years in refugee camps located in other countries. Professional 1, for example outlined that any of these people could '...identify according to their ethnicity but may not have lived or even been born in that country'. Moreover, professional 1 explained:

*You will find some of the Rwandan have been in Congo and some of the Congolese have been in Rwanda because in order to become a refugee you have to cross the border so you will have these arrangements; a factor, which absolutely impacts on developing communities post settlement.*

Overall, the majority of participants referred to cultural identity and its transformation among refugee youth and their families after arrival in Australia as a complex issue that has a significant bearing on the settlement process. Aspects impacting cultural identity included culture shock, lack of connection to own homeland, language expectations and pressure to become Australian.

Four of the participants indicated that a strong cultural identity had a positive influence on the young people and may indeed make the process of assimilation to the new environment easier. Professional 9, for example, indicated that refugee youth

*...might feel pressure to give up their culture and become 'more Australian' whereas the ideal would be to keep their own culture, keep their own ideals but practise it in a way that fits with the Australian community.*

#### *Language*

Several participants noted that language skills and the resources available for young people to acquire the language are significant barriers to adaptation to the new environment. Professional 9 reflected:

*Very, very limited English; so huge language barrier. I remember seeing this look on one girl's face; like she knew the answers but she didn't know how to communicate it to me..... A lot of the education resources that we have for teaching them how to read and write are geared for the younger audience, which I think must be frustrating for them.*

Participants noted that language barriers impacted social interactions that the young people have with others; especially their English-speaking peers. Language skills seemed to be closely related to the refugee youth's schooling experience. For young people who did not have functional literacy in their own language, learning English became very complex.

#### *Schooling experience*

Young people's ability to learn within the Australian system depended on previous schooling and methods of teaching in their own country. Factors included the length of time in a refugee camp and quality of education received there. Professional 6 shared the following reflections:

*Prior education is a huge thing, because we have seen students from Asia, where the education system is strong; they can jump across to mainstream and perform well. Students from Iraq and Afghanistan; if they have been in school, same thing, but ...the African system or systems don't prepare them well for our system.*

Some participants indicated the importance of refugee camp experiences in regard to learning. For example, Professional 1 observed:

*Sometimes, they have been in refugee camps for a long time, possibly all their life. Their schooling experience is not the same as our schooling experience here in Australia and needs to be explored prior to or during commencement of school here.*

Participants indicated that the schooling experiences for refugee youth after their arrival in Australia varied. The teacher's experience and approach seem to have great impact on a students' performance regardless of their cultural or ethnic background. Professional 7 commented

*They are, seriously keen to study, seriously believe that education is going to get them out of the problem that their families are in... but ... the teachers are struggling, they would say: 'These kids don't even speak English, what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to be helping her with her biology? Because she doesn't speak any English and she is pulling back the rest of the class'.*

A few of the respondents indicated academic failure to be a cause of depression and anxiety. Professional 6, for example, commented:

*... sometimes students appear to be depressed, and just academic failure is a huge problem for them. They suffer blow to their self-esteem, because of poor performance at school ...*

### **Structural issues: Racial prejudice and housing affordability**

Participants identified that racial prejudice and housing affordability affected a young refugees' settlement experience. Eight participants commented on different forms of racial prejudice directed towards young refugees and their families. Perceptions varied from straight out institutionalised and individual racism to simply a lack of understanding of the nature of a young refugee's experiences. Professional 6, for instance, explained:

*The community racially profiles people all the time. They are treated like they are thieves and they are treated like they are scary people in car parks and in parks and so on. It's hard to measure that because Townsville is a place where people will say: 'there is no racism here'.*

Housing affordability was a common issue for refugees, resulting in young refugees and their families residing in 'poorer' areas of the city. Living in those areas meant reduced access to public transport and not being able to attend the only school that provided an English as a Second Language unit. Professional 7 summarised her view on the subject in the following way:

*They are not in wealthy suburbs; they are in cheap, often public housing. Cheap rentals; and some of them inappropriately housed.... A lot of them have ended up ... where the public housing is and there is no public transport.*

## **Discussion**

The major themes identified by the participants in this study, schooling experience, trauma and structural issues seem to surface in other similar studies in different periods and with different ethnic groups and in different locations (Bates et al. 2005; Lim, 1979; Masocha, 2014; Miller et al., 2005; Montgomery & Foldspang, 2007). Some patterns of refugee youth experience also occur regardless of the place of settlement or ethnic background.

Participants stressed the impact of past and present traumatic experiences on the refugee youth's wellbeing; some indicated that refugee youth were impacted by trauma even if they did not talk about it. Issues such as the impact of trauma and the importance and challenges of schooling are also highlighted elsewhere (Bates et al., 2005; Gifford et al., 2009). For refugees settling in Townsville, non-withstanding what trauma they had experience in fleeing their place of origin, the research highlights prolonged experiences in refugee camps, thus living life in unsettled and dangerous circumstances for prolong periods of time (Gifford et al., 2009; Oduah, 2003; Rothe et al., 2002). Trauma resulting from these and other experiences impact social and cognitive development; thus the ability to learn and socially adapt and requires access to specialist services (VFST, 2012). This might question a push to regional settlement without providing specialist trauma counselling services. An increased intake of young refugees would necessitate the provision of support services and training, particularly in regional centres such as Townsville where access the range of and access to services might be limited (RCA, 2015).

Another common experience for refugee youth appears to be the barriers a lack of English can create. Participants were concerned about a young person's ability to communicate with others. The lack of interaction with English-speaking peers has been raised as an issue of concern as far back as 1979 by Lim reporting on work with other ethnic groups of refugees. Language barriers could hinder refugee youth's educational outcomes and their access to support and services (Lim, 1979; Masocha, 2014; Hebebrand et al., 2016). Language acquisition is thus an important aspect of settlement programs, yet needs to be tailored to the individual's prior learning experience.

Schooling and the ability to perform well in education depended on the young person's experience in education, and this differed according to the refugee's prior experience and country of origin. Difficulties in attaining educational outcomes could have long-term outcomes, for example, the inability to move out of poorer areas and increasing access to better services. What seems to be emerging is that experiences of trauma, language difficulties, structural issues and initial access to services are similar in the settlement process despite different cultural or ethnic backgrounds; but whether different capabilities in regard to participation in education make a long-term difference needs further investigation.

Structural issues such as housing affordability and racism affect the settlement process, and ultimately how well people achieve in the new country. While regional settlement may offer opportunities, issues such as housing affordability, racism or access to education and health services cannot be ignored (QCOSS, 2014). An openness or willingness to welcome refugees has to be fostered, and services, support and training provided (QCOSS, 2014).

## Conclusion

Providing support for the settlement of young refugees would be a great investment and a significant contributor to the wellbeing of both the refugee youth and their hosts. This research suggests that there are many common factors impacting the settlement experience regardless of refugee youths' cultural or ethnic background; yet their particular background can affect their readiness for and engagement in education. Access to adequate structures and services, and a willingness on the part of the community to welcome refugees are important considerations in regional refugee settlement.

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