



Submission to the Every Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student Succeeding Plan Consultation

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Introduction

Schools play a significant role in supporting the wellbeing and mental health of their students. Indeed, schools, through their engagement with students and families throughout key developmental and learning milestones, offer the prime opportunity for greater collaboration between educators, families, and specialist support services to deliver prevention and early intervention initiatives that ensure that every student from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background can access equitable opportunities and outcomes and succeed at school and beyond.

While the enrolment data available on the Queensland Government website does not record how many students from refugee or CALD backgrounds are enrolled in Queensland schools, humanitarian arrival data from Multicultural Australia reports that 1,010 children aged between five and seventeen arrived in 2018/19 across Brisbane, Logan/Gold Coast, Cairns, Toowoomba and Townsville. As a comparison, the NSW Department of Education reports approximately 1,800 newly arrived refugee students enrolling each year (with more than 11,000 students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in total).

Low English-language proficiency is a significant barrier to learning for students from a CALD background. However, the support needs of students from refugee backgrounds go well beyond English literacy. As the Queensland Department of Education [acknowledges](#), students from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds arrive in Australia having experienced trauma and significant disruption to their education, or in some cases, no previous formal schooling. These experiences affect their ability to learn within a classroom environment. They require higher levels of assistance to support both their English literacy and their mental health and wellbeing to enable them to participate and access equity in education.

The Queensland Government's Student Wellbeing Package that commenced on 1 July 2021 has made provision for wellbeing professionals (including psychologists, counsellors, and social workers) to support students' wellbeing and mental health at school. This is an important first step towards the collaborative care that is required to meet the unique and complex needs of students from refugee backgrounds. Remaining faithful to the principals set out in Queensland's Inclusive Education Policy, particularly implementing a system-wide approach to remove systemic barriers and addressing the different barriers for individual students to ensure they can fully participate in learning, is important to ensure equitable access and outcomes for these students.

QPASTT and HEAL have partnered successfully with a number of Queensland schools to provide individual and group counselling and expressive therapies, evidence-based therapeutic programs like DRUMBEAT, school outreach services to assist with ongoing settlement issues and trauma, and support and training for teachers working with students

from refugee backgrounds. We have also been approached to provide crisis response to teachers and students during both global and local events, such as the Afghanistan Crisis in 2021. While some schools understand the impact of refugee trauma on children, and have taken steps to meet the needs of these students, it is our experience that the lack of consistent, trauma informed approaches across schools pose significant barriers for students and families from refugee backgrounds succeeding within the Queensland education system.

About QPASTT and HEAL

QPASTT is a specialist agency supporting the recovery from torture and trauma of people from refugee backgrounds. We are a not-for-profit agency in receipt of funding from both the Queensland and Commonwealth Governments. We currently employ 87 staff as well as casual bicultural workers with refugee lived experience. We operate throughout Queensland with offices in Brisbane, Logan, Toowoomba, Townsville, and Cairns.

Last fiscal year, QPASTT supported 6207 clients from 82 countries of origin. Almost 30% of our clients are children and youth. Approximately 14% are people seeking asylum. We ran 188 group activities involving 2417 participants. QPASTT also conducted 98 training sessions with practitioners from agencies throughout Queensland to build their understanding of refugee trauma. In 2021, 13 schools requested training from QPASTT, on topics including Working with Children from Refugee Backgrounds, How Trauma affects Children from Refugee Backgrounds, and Vicarious Trauma. Jointly with Multicultural Australia, QPASTT facilitates quarterly gatherings for community leaders from Queensland's refugee communities.

QPASTT is the Queensland member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) and the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims.

HEAL is a school-based specialty mental health program, providing expressive therapies to support young people from refugee backgrounds with their mental health, social inclusion and settlement, with the goal to ensure trauma is not a barrier for learning and wellbeing.

HEAL was established in 2004 in Milpera State High School. Today, HEAL provides expressive therapies to students across four Brisbane secondary schools and to Queensland's diverse cultural communities. In 2020, HEAL supported 239 young people from 47 cultural backgrounds. HEAL programs are funded by private philanthropy and by fee-for-service arrangements with schools. HEAL is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. In 2021, HEAL joined with QPASTT.

What is working across Australia?

We can look to Victoria and New South Wales as jurisdictions that have implemented successful responses to support students from CALD and refugee backgrounds in schools.

New South Wales

As well as providing extensive online resources for staff about supporting students from refugee backgrounds and the impacts of refugee trauma, the NSW Department of Education provides instruction for each school to enact a coordinated response to supporting refugee student's educational, physical, social and emotional needs, led by executive staff.

This response includes comprehensive data gathering at the enrolment process including:

- Information about prior schooling
- English language proficiency and literacy and numeracy levels to inform required modifications to school routines, programming and assessment practices, additional learning support, curriculum options, and professional learning needed by teachers about effective pedagogy and differentiated teaching and learning strategies.

The NSW response also recognises that most refugee students will need support from the school counsellor and some may need referral for specialist trauma counselling. School staff are encouraged to make referrals and access professional support from QPASTT's sister agency STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors.)

NSW resources schools to develop targeted responses for recently arrived refugee students in addition to those provided to develop students' English language proficiency and are focused on helping students settle into schools and bridge the gap of their disrupted schooling, including:

- Small group counselling
- Transition support
- Mentoring and peer support programs
- Social inclusion programs

CASE STUDY: STARTTS in Schools

STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors) is QPASTT's sister agency. They are a non-government Affiliated Health Organisation within NSW Health. STARTTS works in partnership with the NSW Education Department and NSW schools through their [STARTTS in Schools](#) program, to improve the education and mental health outcomes for refugee students, and support teachers, school counsellors and other school personnel.

Through a **School Liaison Program funded by NSW Government**, STARTTS works to promote systematic changes at the school level to improve the learning environment and healing outcomes for students of refugee backgrounds. The program works to build partnership and enhance capacity amongst the NSW Department of Education, Catholic Education and Association of Independent Schools NSW to receive enrolments from students from refugee backgrounds, including providing specialist consultation and professional learning to teachers, welfare staff and school leaders, and supporting schools to implement whole school approaches and systemic changes in schools.

STARTTS in Schools also provides trauma informed direct service programs and individual interventions through Child and Adolescent Counsellors and a team of specialist Youth Workers.

A 2021 [evaluation of STARTTS in Schools](#) included the following findings:

- 85% of participants felt more confidence to offer support to children and young people of refugee backgrounds.
- 97% of reported feeling happier as a result of participating in STARTTS programs.
- 87% of teacher responses indicated academic performance improvement as a result of participating in STARTTS programs.
- 80% of teacher responses indicated observing a significant positive change in the respect that participants showed towards themselves and others.

Victoria

Similarly to NSW, the Victorian Department of Education and Training has invested in multiple interventions to support a whole school, trauma informed response for students from refugee backgrounds, including:

1. Refugee and Asylum Seeker Wellbeing Supplement

Victoria allocated \$17 million over the 2017-2020 school years to government schools based on the number of asylum seeker and refugee background students enrolled. They calculated funding on a per-student amount and schools did not have to apply. This funding was solely to support wellbeing outcomes including:

- Purchasing specialist services and support, including professional learning for staff.
- Provision of individual student counselling or other welfare support services.
- The development of out-of-school-hours learning support programs, including homework clubs.
- Supplementing existing camps, sports and excursions funding for extra-curricular activities and experiences.

2. The Refugee Education Support Program

A Department funded initiative delivered by QPASTT's sister agency Foundation House (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture) and the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) in collaboration with the Catholic Education Commission Victoria and Independent Schools Victoria.

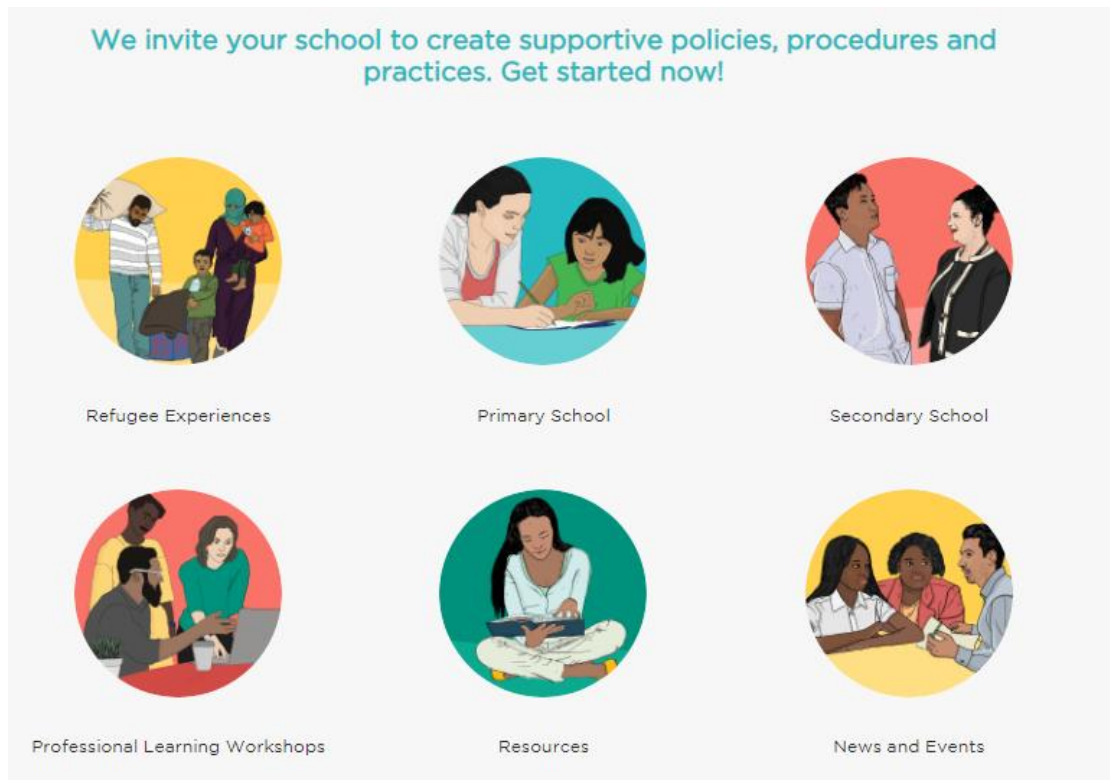
Geographic clusters of both state and non-state schools receive intensive support over 2-years from Foundation House and CMY to implement a whole school response to improve achievement, engagement and wellbeing outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds. Since 2012, more than 150 schools have participated in this program.

3. Foundation House Schools Support Program

Providing Department-funded professional learning workshops, advice and resources for teachers and school staff.

4. *Foundation House – Schools In For Refugees Website*

A comprehensive online resource of professional learning content for teachers and school staff supporting students from refugees in primary and secondary school settings.



[Schools In For Refugees Online Portal](#)

Queensland – Our Joint Opportunity

QPASTT and HEAL's vision to ensure every student from a refugee background succeeds in school aligns with the [National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#).

An effective education setting must include sustained investment in a Wellbeing Culture, Targeted Responses and Well-equipped Educators. This investment must be supported by a fundamental commitment to a collaborative care approach, where schools and specialist agencies become one wrap-around service system for the student and their family.



Wellbeing Culture

- Early assessment and referrals for refugee students to QPASTT counselling
- School-based outreach by trauma-informed Youth Workers

Targeted Responses

- Targeted and evidence-based programs like HEAL in place to support trauma-recovery

Well-equipped Educators

- Funded, ongoing professional learning for teachers and school staff
- Specialist support from external agencies to enable whole school responses

Collaborative Care

- Partnership between the Department and individual schools to enable appropriate trauma-informed interventions and support services to students from refugee backgrounds.
- Enabling interventions for students from refugee backgrounds within school-grounds, during school hours by all schools.

Targeted Responses in Queensland

HEAL in Schools

In 2021, HEAL Expressive Therapists were based in four Queensland secondary schools to support trauma-recovery for refugee students. Woodridge State High School, St James College, Yeronga State High School and Milpera State High School purchased HEAL services. HEAL therapists have all completed a Masters of Mental Health in Art Therapy and work within a trauma informed framework. Some therapists come from a teaching background and all complete ongoing professional development about developmental trauma in children and young people.

239 students from 47 cultural backgrounds were supported through individual therapy or group sessions. The HEAL therapists also supported wider school programs and activities as part of school Wellbeing teams, running lunchtime groups and classroom check-ins, supporting cultural and pastoral care group programs and organising social and recreational activities including celebrations of inclusion (e.g. Harmony Day activities) and promoting mental health activities for the wider student body.

Referrals into HEAL are generally through School Guidance Officers or self-referral for presentations including dysregulation in the classroom, poor attention and impulse control, disengagement from school, feelings of worry, sadness, or fear, becoming withdrawn or socially isolated, and self-harming.

HEAL collects post-intervention feedback from both students and teachers. Teachers have advised that HEAL students are learning to better self-regulate with less outbursts of anger, they are relating better to others, have increased focus and concentration, and decreased their frustration in the classroom. Students have reported that HEAL was the only place they could discuss family concerns or share distressing memories and feelings.

QPASTT School Outreach Services

QPASTT has developed partnerships with schools across Brisbane and Ipswich where we offer weekly outreach services in schools, including:

1. Direct student support

QPASTT Youth Advocacy and Engagement Officers support student needs and aspirations across a range of issues including social support, family conflict, community participation, housing, employment support, leadership skill development, mentoring and study pathways. Students can self-refer to QPASTT, or a referred by teachers, guidance officers

and other school staff. QPASTT also assists young people with referrals out to other services for specialist assistance.

2. Groups and activities

Through consultations with young people and school staff, QPASTT offers a range of groups to meet the interests, needs and aspirations of young people. These groups and activities range from therapeutic groups such as DRUMBEAT, Girls Talk and Rock and Water to structured lunchtime sporting activities or social groups. It is important for ongoing therapeutic groups that they be embedded in the timetable.

3. Advocacy

QPASTT supports students with advocacy for their individual needs as well as for interventions that address the broader needs of a school or student group (e.g. for wellbeing support for student groups, or trauma-informed classrooms.)

Individual advocacy is important for helping schools to understand how a student's circumstances is affecting their attendance and engagement, giving the school the opportunity to provide appropriate support. Young people are encouraged to develop their own advocacy skills during these processes, and to develop positive working relationships with key school staff to ensure that school is a safe place for them.

Our advocacy work can include case conferencing with key support staff and teachers within schools. This enables a collaborative approach and the opportunity to implement wrap around supports.

CASE STUDIES OF QPASTT SCHOOL OUTREACH

STUDENT A

A female student engaged with QPASTT's 1:1 support. She was skipping school, distracted in class and on a pathway to exclusion from school.

QPASTT's Youth Engagement and Advocacy Officer was able to work with key school staff to outline the barriers facing the student at home and at school and the impact of her refugee experience. The school was able to put in place additional support for the student to complete her schoolwork and teachers were made aware of her situation – helping them to improve communication with the student and provide appropriate intervention in the classroom.

As a result of the support from the school and QPASTT, the student's engagement at school improved, including joining the school rugby team and participating in excursions.

The relationship between school staff and the student improved significantly, which helped the student feel safer expressing her needs to teachers and wellbeing officers. QPASTT also organised case conferences with the school and the student's family, improving family engagement and understanding of their child's schooling experience.

STUDENT B

During a QPASTT school outreach session, a student disclosed past experiences of sexual violence. As well as establishing emotional support plans for the student, QPASTT's Youth Engagement and Advocacy Officer was able to liaise with the school to ensure the student could access culturally appropriate support through an external service during school hours. This was important because the student did not feel safe accessing support outside of school hours and she did not want to engage with the school's internal wellbeing team on this issue.

STUDENT C

A student who was accessing QPASTT's school outreach support and counselling became homeless due to family violence. QPASTT's Youth Engagement and Advocacy Officer initiated a partnership with the school to ensure the student could access appropriate support from QPASTT counsellors, housing and domestic violence services. Collective advocacy from QPASTT and the school enabled the student to access urgent financial support through Centrelink and additional brokerage support through Brisbane Domestic Violence Service. QPASTT advocated for the student to leave class to respond to her housing circumstance and to be considered for additional support with schoolwork. QPASTT was also able to raise the school's awareness of safety concerns with certain family members to ensure the student was protected.

The Refugee Experience: Understanding the Journey

Since QPASTT was established in 1995, up until the recent border closures, Australia has accepted at least 13,000 humanitarian migrants each year in addition to people seeking asylum in our country. Queensland is now home to tens of thousands of former refugees who have escaped persecution, violence, and dispossession. For example, it is estimated that there are 70,000 people of African descent who now call Queensland home (Queensland African Communities Council, 2021).

Regardless of their visa class, humanitarian migrants are people who have been forcibly displaced from their homelands. Their journeys are varied, and their resilience is great. Nonetheless, the evidence both internationally and in Australia is that people with this background experience much higher levels of psychological distress than those who have not (Hynie 2018).

Across the first three waves of the Building a New Life in Australia Survey (BNLA)—a longitudinal survey which examined the experiences of former refugees who had resettled in Australia—between 36 and 41% of respondents were classified as having moderate to high risk of psychological distress. This is more than three times higher compared to the rates for the broader Australian population: 7% of men and 11% of women at any given time (Maio et al. 2017).

Exposure to multiple adverse events on the migration journey coupled with post-settlement stressors, which are encountered as people adjust to their new lives in Australia, were identified as risk factors contributing to these higher rates of psychological distress. These are in effect the social determinants of refugee trauma. Of QPASTT's current client group, 23% have experienced some form of torture including physical, psychological, or sexual torture or chemical, sensory, or environmental manipulation. Additionally, 76% of clients report experiencing traumatic events including arbitrary imprisonment, kidnapping, witnessing death or harm to a significant other, destruction of home, communal violence, forced involvement in combat (including as a child soldier) and general deprivation and hardship.

How the Refugee Experience Impacts Education

The Impact of Refugee Trauma on Children

During the refugee journey to Australia, all students and families have experienced deprivation, including:

- Limited or no access to health care, clean water, or sanitation.
- Disconnection from family, friends, and the broader community.

- Disrupted schooling and/or opportunities for play.
- Limited daily essentials (e.g., food and clothing).

In situations of armed conflict and persecution, and in transit countries, children and families are likely to have survived traumatic events, including:

- Witnessing human rights violations on a mass scale.
- Death of family members and friends.
- Separation from parents and carers.
- Rape, torture, and imprisonment.
- Bombing, burning, and clearing of land.
- Daily threats to self and others.
- Imposed isolation.
- Perilous flight or escape.
- Daily discrimination.

([Schools In For Refugees, Foundation House](#))

The impact of these experiences on children can include changes in their behaviour (including aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal from others, sadness and conduct problems), feelings of shame or embarrassment, fear and helplessness, and problems in relationships including peers, family, and teachers. It is estimated that around 11% of refugee children are likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (Phoenix Australia Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health).

In 2021, the main reasons for referral of the 239 refugee students to HEAL's school-based expressive therapies included:

- Feeling worried or fearful
- Sad, distressed, flat mood
- Possible family issues
- Conflict with peers
- Poor impulse control
- Difficulty maintaining attention to task
- Disengaged from school
- Aggressive/often in conflict
- Withdrawn or socially isolated
- Self-harming
- Visa status anxiety

The Impact of Disrupted Schooling

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that only 68% of refugee children are enrolled in primary school, and only 34% enrolled in secondary school. This means that upon entering the Australian education system, many children from refugee background have either severely disrupted schooling, or no schooling at all and their support needs go well beyond English language acquisition.

The more schooling a child has missed, the greater the gap in academic performance - which must be made up while learning English. Children from refugee backgrounds are likely to have limited literacy abilities in their first or additional languages. Upon entering the Australian education system, they:

- Transition through different education settings (e.g., English language school to mainstream).
- Manage new learning environments.
- Learn English language and literacy.
- Experience substantial gaps between their educational knowledge and that of their Australian peers.
- Experience the impact of ongoing settlement demands on learning.

([Foundation House](#))

Students Seeking Asylum

Students who are seeking asylum face additional challenges. Some have spent indefinite time in immigration detention or offshore in Nauru or Papua New Guinea, which has directly led to poor mental health outcomes. Others have lived in the Queensland community with an unresolved visa status or a return pending immigration status for almost a decade. Many students and their families do not have access to Medicare or have the right to work. Some people seeking asylum (including children who may have been born here) have been living in our Queensland community for more than a decade.

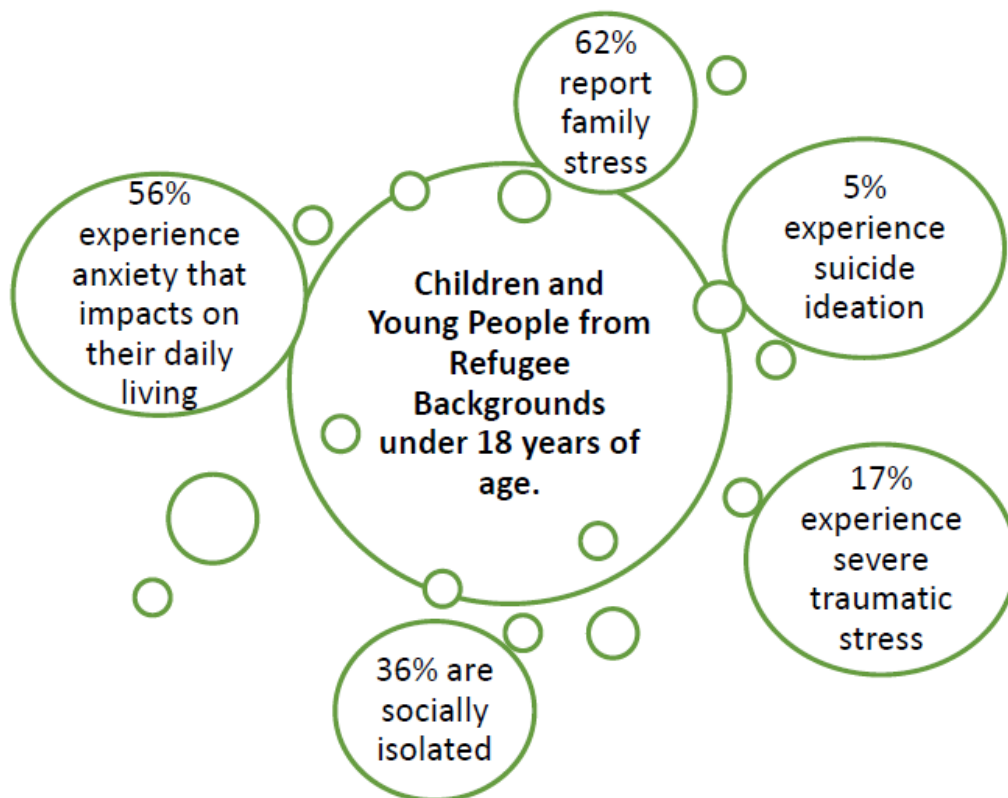
After a significant period in detention (both in Australia and offshore in either PNG or Nauru) and without immigration status resolution, a considerable proportion of QPASTT's asylum seeker clients present with:

- Complete sense of powerlessness, loss of hope and absolute shattering of assumptions about humanity including their welcome in Australia.
- Secondary trauma from extended detention including substantial decline of pre-existing internal emotional coping strategies and emotional regulation.

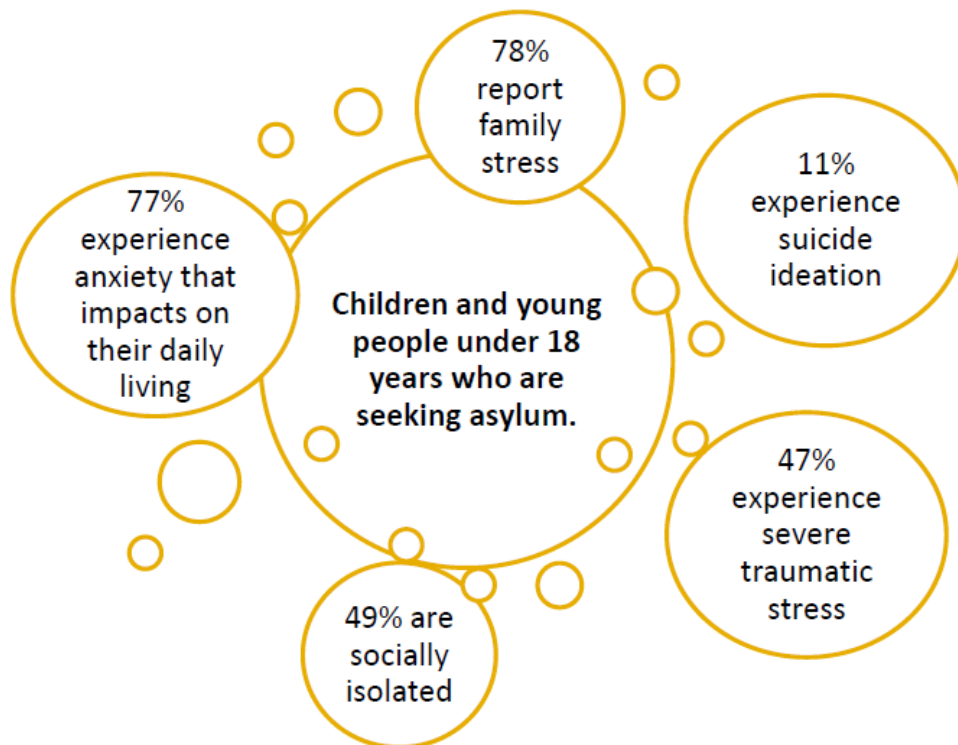
- Heightened and long-lasting states of distress due to difficulties with living conditions (severe financial stress often without the means to change this situation due to visa restrictions such as lack of work rights, deteriorating mental health, transient housing).
- Fear regarding immigration uncertainty including risk of re-detention, deportation, and transfer back to Nauru or PNG.
- Stressors in their family unit (both in Australia and overseas) affecting mental health.
- Generalised lack of trust in systems of helping. This is compounded if school staff do not understand the asylum seeker experience. Some asylum seekers report that care professionals doubt their experience stating that 'Australia would not do that.'
- There continue to be suicides of people seeking asylum in Queensland.

Visa status anxiety is one of the referral reasons to HEAL programs across all our schools. The symptomology of children and youth seeking asylum is significantly worse than other children and youth from refugee backgrounds that QPASTT supports.

The following statistics are indicative of the experiences of children and young people from refugee backgrounds under the age of 18 years who are our clients.



The situation for asylum seeker children and young people under the age of 18 years is of significant concern. Their psychological situation is exacerbated by prolonged visa uncertainty.



Supporting students seeking asylum – a case study from HEAL

HEAL is working with two siblings, a brother and sister, who travelled to Australia by boat and were detained for numerous years in immigration detention on Nauru.

They have missed primary schooling, but were able to enrol at a Brisbane high school. The brother is now in Year 12 and the sister is in Year 11. They live with visa uncertainty every day and are hoping to settle in the United States. They have experienced complex trauma and missed key education milestones.

They have both received HEAL support since the start of high school. Art therapy has helped them to address their trauma, and to feel safe, connected and supported so that they were able to attend class and learn. They have both had many incidences where they were unable to be in class or school due to their trauma symptoms and HEAL therapists have been able to support them in regulating overwhelming emotions. Explosive and uncontrollable anger has been one trauma symptom the school well-being staff has been able to attend to in a positive way. The brother has said that being able to attend school has saved his life. Attending school is the only stability in their daily life.

Weekly HEAL support has given them a sense of security, but HEAL is limited in its current service arrangements with the school. Ideally, HEAL support would be most beneficial if a therapist could attend the school every day. In one incident, the sister was overwhelmed with distress and came to HEAL looking for support, but there was no HEAL art therapist in the school on that day. The student's level of distress meant she was unable to attend classes.

Key Barriers and Suggested Actions for Students of Refugee Backgrounds Succeeding at School

While the Department of Education has stated its commitment to inclusive and equitable education for all students, in QPASTT and HEAL's experience students from refugee backgrounds experience significant barriers to access education and the necessary supports to succeed at school. These barriers are occurring at the individual and systemic level.

1. The experience of trauma is a barrier to learning and without early therapeutic intervention and other supports, students from a refugee background who are affected by trauma will struggle to succeed in school and beyond.

Students are not available for learning when they are in a traumatised state. Without appropriate interventions to remove trauma as a barrier to learning, to address knowledge gaps, and support ongoing wellbeing, belonging, connection and engagement within a school community, students from refugee backgrounds will continue to experience inequity of outcome in education.

Therapeutic support including counselling, expressive therapies, outreach services and group work delivered in schools can support positive mental health and wellbeing of individual students, reduce dysregulated behaviour that can disrupt classrooms, and promote a wider school culture focused on wellbeing.

Belonging and connection is a key aspect of trauma-recovery. Building school cultures and communities focused on meaningful celebrations of diversity and committed to inclusion and anti-discrimination will ensure schools are places where students and their families feel safe and valued.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- 1. Provide early assessment for every student from a refugee background and enable therapeutic trauma-recovery interventions in schools.**

The impact of therapeutic trauma recovery interventions for students from refugee backgrounds –case studies from HEAL participants in 2021.

STUDENT A

A female Year 12 student had arrived in Australia on arranged marriage. She self-referred to HEAL due to domestic violence issues. She first presented to HEAL for emotional support, relaxation and stress management through art therapy. HEAL supported her to connect with Domestic Violence services and find safety. HEAL was able to work with the school for the student to continue remote learning with assistance from a tutor and school staff. She has since successfully completed her ATAR and has been accepted into a Bachelor of Pharmacy.

STUDENT B

A female Year 12 student presented to HEAL due to fatigue, insomnia and panic episodes. HEAL engaged the student with regular sessions throughout the year for management of anxiety and study stress. She successfully completed Year 12 with accommodation for health needs and has received an offer to study psychology.

- 2. Embed commitments to wellbeing and belonging in schools (with compliance and accountability measures) including programs and initiatives that are co-designed with student leaders.**

Addressing bullying and racial conflict by fostering connection and belonging – a collaboration between QPASTT and a primary school in Cairns

QPASTT is collaborating with a Cairns primary school with a significant population of students from refugee backgrounds. Through consultation with school staff and leadership, the issue of bullying and racial conflict was identified as a concern. Students from refugee backgrounds were comfortable and confident in English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) classes but not so in mainstream classes. Social segregation was more apparent in the older girls of the school population. QPASTT worked with the

school to design a group based program targeting girls in grade 6 who were preparing to transition to high school, and who were experiencing racial conflict. The group was a mix of 11 girls from Congolese, Bhutanese, Indigenous and Australian identified backgrounds (6 from refugee backgrounds and 5 from non-refugee backgrounds). The aim of the group was to encourage meaningful relationships across the diverse participants.

The school identified students to invite to the group and liaised with their parents to obtain consent. This process was improved by a number of the Congolese families already knowing QPASTT's bicultural workers. A range of education resources has been developed by Equitas – a Canadian based organisation promoting human rights empowerment and advocacy. Session activities were drawn from the Equitas Play It Fair! Toolkit, human rights, non-discrimination and peaceful conflict resolution. The activities were adapted to the girls in the group's languages, cultural identity and life experiences. Throughout the 6 week group program sessions focused on:

- social cohesion and team building
- safety and connection
- emotional regulation
- assertiveness vs anger
- communication, problem solving and conflict resolution
- friendship

The group ran for 6 weeks from October to December 2021.

Attendance was high, with the participants from refugee backgrounds attendance at almost 100% across the 6 sessions. During sessions, group facilitators observed that participants engaged well in activities that focused on building cohesion – specifically addressing the original concerns raised by the school. The outcomes of the group were particularly positive for students of refugee backgrounds who reported an increase in their confidence and comfort within school.

The group was evaluated using the adaptations of the Heikkinen Social Circle, which was initially created for an in-depth study of social network, engagement and flourishing of young people from refugee background in Finland. Each participant completed an adapted version of the Heikkinen Social Circle focused on indicating friends within school and friends within the group. Then to track diversity of friends, participants were also asked to indicate which friends spoke a language other than English or were born outside of Australia. These Heikkinen Social Circle tools were administered twice - at the initial and final session of the group. The friendships identified within the group of young people rose by an average of 48.7% (range of 14% to 75%). Of particular note is that students

from refugee backgrounds, who also had higher attendance rates, had a significant increase in friendships by an average of 63% (range 43% to 75%).

2. Schools are not trauma informed or culturally safe, leading to students from refugee backgrounds being re-traumatised within the education system and unable to access the same opportunities as non-refugee background students.

Our client experience indicates that many schools lack cultural safety and are not trauma informed.

The core principle of being trauma informed is creating an environment that is emotionally safe, where an individual is treated with dignity, where they have agency and control over their circumstances, and they feel a sense of connection, attachment and belonging with others.

Many teachers and school staff do not understand the impact of developmental trauma on learning and behavior in students. In our experience, a trauma response is often deemed a behavioural issue by teachers and schools and responded to with discipline and behavior management. These responses serve to further isolate, shame, and stigmatise students, without addressing the core issues of trauma.

Students and families from refugee backgrounds will often have no prior experience engaging with a Western education system. There is an inconsistent use of interpreters at every stage of engagement with schools, from enrolment through participation and discipline. Not being seen or heard perpetuates the experience of trauma and inhibits recovery and belonging.

While many individual staff and teachers have completed some proficiency training in cultural competency and trauma, this knowledge is not consistent and not embedded across school systems, policies and procedures, or teacher training and accreditation.

Many schools do not acknowledge the systemic bias and discrimination within their systems that prevent equality of opportunity, including not considering the impact of trauma, language barriers, disrupted schooling, access to resources, or recognising diverse cultural perspectives within curriculums and school communities. Students from asylum seeker backgrounds experience increased disadvantage including ineligibility for programs because of visa status.

CASE STUDY: Trauma informed support for refugee students at Milpera State High School v minimal support at a mainstream high school.

A thirteen-year-old boy of Congolese background was a student at Milpera SHS for two years. He (and his siblings) received intensive support with learning difficulties, social and emotional issues and significant child safety and family issues. The family had experienced complex trauma in Africa and multiple dislocations, with time spent in a number of refugee camps offering no educational opportunities. In Australia, there was serious domestic violence in the home, which eventually resulted in parental separation. His mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, requiring intensive, dangerous treatments and surgeries, which aim to prolong her life for an estimated five years. A great deal of support was provided at Milpera SHS, including mental health support with both HEAL and QPASTT therapists. With this support, the student was learning to his best potential, maintaining friendships and experiencing success in numerous domains. He exited Milpera to Glenala SHS and within the first seven days was suspended following an altercation with another student.

There are many similar examples of students with complex trauma who initially (or for some period) demonstrated very difficult behaviours and were unable to meet learning and behaviour expectations. In time, and with the significant supports offered at Milpera, they were able to make enormous changes and progress and were functioning as successful students when they transitioned to mainstream high school. However, once they were in a new environment that was lacking trauma informed processes and sufficient educational, social, and emotional supports, things quickly unravelled with students suspended multiple times and then excluded within a very short period.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

1. Develop a highly capable education workforce that can identify and work with complex refugee trauma in ways that promote healing

QPASTT currently delivers training about complex refugee trauma. This includes a specific focus on the impact of trauma in children, youth, and families. In 2020-21, QPASTT delivered 98 trainings about complex trauma to 1214 participants. This included 13 sessions requested by schools. From QPASTT practice, most teachers are compassionate and empathetic to the refugee experience. However, many lack the understanding of how refugee trauma poses barriers to learning and wellbeing.

We recommend that teachers and school staff have access to free, mandatory training to improve their knowledge and skills in relation to responding to students with complex

refugee trauma. This is additional and different to cultural awareness and responsiveness training (which is also critical).

We recommend that school principals, teachers and administration staff have access to free, mandatory cultural competency training to assist them to perform their duties in a culturally safe manner.

These training programs should form ongoing professional development and include appropriate compliance procedures.

We also recommend that cultural competency, understanding the refugee experience and trauma informed practice is included in teacher training at tertiary institutions and forms part of teacher accreditation.

In QPASTT's experience, teachers are very open to further training that increase their cultural competency and ability to support students affected by trauma.

Feedback from teachers participating in QPASTT training in 2021 on what further training would be useful:

"As much as possible."

"Any that is available."

"Just more and more."

"Key cultural differences."

"More broad trauma training."

"Refresher training is necessary."

"Cultural understanding re: dealing with trauma. E.g. within the family culturally."

"I feel that this as a refresher each year is good. I don't know if teachers at our school do this training, I think it would be great for them too."

"To understand different behaviours from refugee background / asylum seekers."

"I am open to any information – maybe more about different cultures and their expectations."

"More examples on what to do with students from these backgrounds."

"Approaches to teaching content for struggling students."

2. Develop a whole school, trauma informed approach to supporting students from refugee backgrounds.

QPASTT and HEAL recommend that a whole school approach is developed in consultation with relevant agencies to ensure schools are trauma informed and responding appropriately to the needs of students from refugee backgrounds. This approach would include:

- Improving school compliance around the use of interpreters for students and families from CALD backgrounds.
- Embedding trauma informed principles into Departmental and school policies and procedures related to engagement with students and families, behaviour management and discipline.
- Implementing accountability measures for school performance related to trauma informed practice and cultural competency and the progress of students from refugee backgrounds.
- Building school communities to be places of welcome and belonging for students and families from CALD and refugee backgrounds, celebrating cultural diversity in a meaningful way and building connections to local communities, diverse community leaders and faith leaders

3. The dismantling of specialist English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) units in Phase 2 schools has left students from CALD backgrounds without the support they need to succeed, and unable to access the same opportunities as other students.

The idea that every student has equal opportunity through enrolling in their local school has led to inequity of opportunity and outcomes for CALD students. Students have moved from the intensive, nurturing environments of an EAL/D unit in a Phase 2 school or Milpera State High School to receiving minimum support in a local school where teaching staff have not been equipped with the skills and pedagogy required to support students learning English or recovering from trauma.

The learning levels of CALD populations are unique and cannot be generalised. Teaching in mainstream classrooms is difficult when levels are so wide-ranging. Students without intensive language support or therapeutic trauma-recovery support will struggle to manage themselves in a classroom of students who have years of experience in the education system and speak English. The increased focus on academic results for schools has resulted in many students from CALD backgrounds feeling pushed into non-academic and vocational pathways instead of receiving developmental support.

Bicultural teacher aides and school engagement workers can be vital support in the classroom and for building a sense of belonging at schools for students and families from CALD backgrounds, but funding for these positions is inconsistent.

CASE STUDY: Limited EAL/D support for primary school students.

An 11-year-old girl of Sudanese background arrived in Australia three years ago, following a very dangerous and prolonged refugee journey via Egypt. Her single mother has complex PTSD and is having great difficulty managing the process of settlement and the needs of her five children. This student spent three years in two different primary schools and once she was old enough to be enrolled at Milpera, her mother advocated for her to change schools because she was so unhappy with the lack of support and progress experienced in the primary system. The student presents with reasonably good spoken English, but very limited reading and writing skills and has been enrolled at the post-beginner level at Milpera, despite three years of education in Australia.

This scenario has been seen many times at Milpera SHS. Primary school aged students who miss the opportunity for specialist intensive English language and settlement support are significantly disadvantaged educationally. This further affects their behavioural outcomes and social and emotional wellbeing. These students often see themselves as failures and miss the necessary support to develop strong, positive identities during the complex acculturation process. They often gravitate to other students who are also struggling and are more likely to disengage from education and never fill in the large gaps in their learning.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- 1. Ensure intensive and consistent support for students from CALD backgrounds in primary and secondary schools, through specialist EAL/D teachers, bicultural teacher aides and school engagement officers, and other appropriate specialist services.**

QPASTT and HEAL recommend that schools work with appropriate agencies to develop ongoing and culturally safe individual assessments and interventions for students from refugee backgrounds to respond to both their welfare and educational needs, and that data from these assessments and interventions is recorded and analysed on an annual basis to track a student's progress throughout their education – with additional supports provided as indicated by the data.

Further, we recommend that schools provide flexibility within assessment structures to consider the impacts of trauma and disrupted schooling for students from refugee backgrounds. For example, when students are stressed, their access to their language skills will be stressed. The current examination and assessment system does not provide adequate mitigations (e.g., options for language support), leading to poor assessment outcomes.

4. Ad hoc approaches to well-being and varied levels of understanding of the impact of trauma on learning across schools means that students from refugee backgrounds are not guaranteed access to the necessary support they need to succeed in school.

In our experience, every school has different policies and practices for allowing us to provide mental health support to students who have been referred to our services. Some schools recognise QPASTT and HEAL as an essential service and are flexible, allowing access and sessions for students during school time. Other schools push for services to be provided only outside of school hours and have strict requirements for allowing us access or space to support students (e.g., some schools require a QPASTT Counsellor to have CPR and anaphylaxis training before allowed on site.)

Authorisation and access for specialist services in schools is often dependent on the approach of individual principals and leadership teams. Regular principal changes contribute to inconsistent approaches within schools.

Many schools look for help from services like HEAL and QPASTT at times of crisis rather than establishing early intervention and proactive partnerships. There is a lack of understanding that students from refugee backgrounds have unique emotional and psychosocial needs, and that there is an expertise available from counsellors and other therapists that teachers are unable to provide in the classroom.

Many families are dependent on the opportunities available at their local school. This inconsistent approach to the provision of therapeutic services in schools therefore disadvantages those at schools that do not offer these support services.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

QPASTT and HEAL recommend that the Department makes provision to support formal, consistent collaborative care linkages between schools and specialist refugee trauma-recovery services to ensure that schools are culturally safe for students and equipped to respond to complex refugee trauma.

Conclusion

QPASTT and HEAL are grateful for the opportunity to demonstrate some of the barriers and suggested actions to ensure every culturally and linguistically diverse student succeeds at school, and to demonstrate some of the successful interventions and investments that are occurring elsewhere in Australia.

We are aware that some of the actions we suggest are necessarily broad within the scope of this consultation and submission. We suggest that further consultation is required between the Department, schools, relevant service agencies, students and families to further develop and implement strategies that address the identified barriers and support the Every Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Student Succeeding Plan. QPASTT and HEAL would welcome the opportunity to participate in further consultation.

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