MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

YOUNG AFRICAN REFUGEES IN WESTERN SYDNEY HIGH SCHOOLS

ELIZABETH CASSITY AND DR. GREG GOW
CENTRE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

University of Western Sydney
Bringing knowledge to life

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CENTRE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes how refugee young people from African countries are negotiating new learning challenges in three Western Sydney high schools. Intensive English Centres (IECs) were attached to two of the schools.

The research consisted of a series of arts-based workshops, conducted by the researchers with the assistance of two multilingual arts facilitators, targeting six groups of young people in Years 7 -11. The young people were overwhelmingly of Southern Sudanese background. Other participants came from Sierra Leone, Somalia and Senegal.

In addition to the workshops, focus group interviews were conducted with fourteen teachers across the three high schools and a consultation was conducted with parents/guardians and community members. Two professional development workshops were also conducted with teachers and other school staff.

The research highlighted varying experiences across the three schools but overall it found the schooling system is not working well for newly-arrived African students. There are success stories but, in general, students are struggling to integrate into a schooling system with which they and their relatives are almost totally unfamiliar.

Nearly all the students surveyed began school in Australia with low literacy levels in their first language and minimal (approximately 3-4 years) schooling completed in their country of birth or place of asylum. This presented challenges for them and their teachers which were multiplied when they began high school. In addition to challenges experienced by students adjusting to school, the research noted difficulties experienced within their family lives.

While primarily documenting the experiences of students, the research also explores teachers' perceptions. In general, the research found that teachers need to know more about their new students from Africa. They wanted a knowledge base from which to build their practice with new African students. Similarly, the research found that parents/guardians and community members need more information about their children's new learning contexts.

The report finishes with a series of recommendations to improve the educational outcomes of young African refugees in high schools. Underlining them is the need for an integrated approach toward schooling in which various stakeholders work together.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elizabeth Cassity is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. While undertaking this project she was a Research Associate at the Centre for Cultural Research (CCR) at the University of Western Sydney. Her research interests combine education, youth, international development and African studies. Elizabeth has published widely on youth and education. Her recent publications include 'Making up for lost time. The experiences of Southern Sudanese young refugees in high schools' (with Greg Gow) in *Youth Studies Australia* (2005), and a major essay called 'Going for Global: Youth Transition in the South Pacific' (2005). She has worked with the Academy for Educational Development in New York, and was a teacher in northern Namibia.

Greg Gow is a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Macquarie University. While undertaking this project he was an Australian Research Council (ARC) Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Cultural Research (CCR), University of Western Sydney. His research explores the cultural dimensions of humanitarian settlement with a focus upon refugees from the Africa region in Australia. Greg is the author of *The Oromo in Exile: From the Horn of Africa to the Suburbs of Australia* (2002). At the CCR he has undertaken three major enterprises: the three year 'Communities Across Borders' project investigating the transnational dynamics of emerging refugee groups from Sudan, Ethiopia and Burundi; the Sydney-based 'Young Africans in Schools Project' which this report documents; and the 'Assyrian Community Capacity Building Project' in Fairfield City.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACL	Australian Centre for Languages
AMEP	Adult Migrant English Program
CCR	Centre for Cultural Research (University of Western Sydney)
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
HSC	Higher School Certificate
IEC	Intensive English Centre
IHSS	Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MRC	Migrant Resource Centre
NSW DET	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
PDHPE	Personal Development, Health and Physical Education
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
QPASTT	Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma
SHP	Special Humanitarian Program
STARTTS	Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UHM	Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UWS	University of Western Sydney
VET	Vocational Education and Training
YASP	Young Africans in Schools Project

INTRODUCTION

The Africa region is currently the focus of Australia's humanitarian program and is likely to remain so for some time. During 2003-04, 63 percent of people assisted under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) were from the region, and African countries comprised eight of the top twelve countries of birth for humanitarian settlers. The majority are proposed by relatives and friends in Australia before entering under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP: visa subclass 202); meanwhile, smaller numbers enter under the Refugee Category (especially visa subclasses 200: Refugee and 204: Woman at Risk).

Since 2002, Sudan has ranked number one (47 percent of entrants in 2003-04) (DIMIA 2004). Overwhelmingly, entrants are of Southern Sudanese backgrounds and speak Juba Arabic. The majority of Sudanese entrants belong to the Dinka ethnic group. Other countries of birth are also featuring, although in smaller numbers, including Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burundi and Rwanda. Added to these are Kenya and Egypt where the children of Sudanese refugees were born.

Although belonging to discrete national groups, African young people in Australia experience affinities, including linguistic commonalities and cultural dispositions. Tied to these are attachments to pan-African motifs and styles. Being 'black' and 'African' is variously considered a source of pride and difference—especially in multicultural school settings where cultures 'rub up' against each other. For instance, many Southern Sudanese young people speak Swahili (having learned in Kenya) and enjoy socialising with Swahili speaking Central Africans.

In NSW the growing numbers of arrivals are settling in Western Sydney, although, in recent years, DIMIA has dispersed humanitarian entrants to regional locations, notably Newcastle, Wollongong, Coffs Harbour, Goulburn and Wagga Wagga. The families of African refugees settling in these locations are generally large and extended, with plenty of children. Many are without adult males and are headed by a widowed mother or aunt. Consequently, NSW public schools are increasingly dealing with newly arrived children and their families with unfamiliar family compositions and diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Typically, newly arrived high school-aged students enrol in one of the fourteen Intensive English Centres (IECs) or in the Intensive English High School (IEHS) located in Sydney and Wollongong. This report will refer only to IECs as the IEHS is not located in Western Sydney where the research took place. The IECs provide students with Intensive English tuition and high school preparation before they enrol in high school. The course, the Intensive English Program, is conducted over a maximum of 3 terms for regular students, and a maximum of 4 terms for special needs students, including refugees and special humanitarian entrants (NSW DET 2004).

The new students are beginning at IECs under considerable stress. Meanwhile, teachers are feeling variously overwhelmed by the learning challenges and find it difficult to develop expectations for them. While previous cohorts of refugee students could often be fast-tracked into high school, the new African students are requiring more time. In general, they have completed fewer years of schooling than other humanitarian entrants originating from Asia, Europe and the Middle East. According to the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs' 2003-04 figures, upon their arrival in Australia Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS)-assisted African young people aged between 16 and 24 years averaged 6.3 years of schooling (DIMIA 2004).

Teachers and their schools (including on-site IECs) do not know enough about the educational, cultural and family backgrounds of their new African students. This report aims to provide schools with the knowledge generated by the 'Young Africans in Schools Project' (YASP)—a partnership between the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney and the Multicultural Programs Unit within the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. The qualitative research was undertaken from August through to December 2004, investigating the schooling experiences of 65 recently arrived African young people across three high schools in Western Sydney.

YASP explored how refugee young people from the Africa region are negotiating new learning challenges in high schools. It was guided by six themes: transitions, classrooms, teachers, extra-curricular activities and pathways to further education and employment, and parents/guardians. Students were accessed at three high school sites in Blacktown and Bankstown. IECs were attached to two of the schools.

The primary component of the project was a series of five arts-based workshops with students in each of the schools. In collaboration with two multilingual arts facilitators, we conducted the workshops with six groups of young people approximating to Years 7-8 and Years 9-11 age levels (drawn from IEC and high school classes). The participants were recruited with the assistance of school staff and consisted of equal numbers of girls and boys. We asked for a range of students, very new arrivals and those who had been in Australia for more than one year. The young people were overwhelmingly of Southern Sudanese (60) background, which represented Australia's refugee intake priority at the time. Other participants originated from Sierra Leone (3), Somalia (1) and Senegal (1).

Without exception, the students enjoyed creating tactile objects in a group workshop setting. The arts-based approach enabled us to sensitively explore a range of issues with them—transitions, classrooms, teachers, pathways to further education, and extra-curricular activities. After the initial two sessions, the young people became very generous toward the research team and openly expressed their experiences and feelings about schooling in Australia. They created a portfolio of paintings, drawings, textile collages, and drama plays—which constituted the research data. Upon completion, each student received a professional development certificate of participation from the NSW DET and UWS.

Supplementing the student workshops were focus group interviews conducted with fourteen teachers across the three high schools. The interviews addressed the range of project sub-questions and allowed teachers to identify what they see as the key issues. Additionally, two professional development workshops were conducted with 90 teachers and other school staff. Finally, a one-off, two-hour consultation was conducted with sixteen parents/guardians and community members.

Ostensibly, the research highlighted varying experiences across the three schools. But overall we found the schooling system is not working well for new African students. There are success stories but, in general, students are struggling with new institutional settings and unrealistic expectations. We found that the young people are attempting to integrate into a schooling system with which they and their relatives are almost totally unfamiliar. The report explores the key themes, and factors which help and hinder students' transitions to schooling.

The first section of the report describes how the research was undertaken. The second, and principal part, describes and discusses the students' perceptions. We provide stories and case studies to illustrate the hopes, expectations and challenges experienced by the young people who participated in the project. The perceptions of teachers, parents/guardians and communities are described in the subsequent sections. Discussions (by way of analysis of the research data) are integrated throughout. Following these are a series of interrelated recommendations directed toward improving the educational outcomes of new African students in NSW high schools. Finally, the report concludes with a brief discussion.

As will become clear, the report's title 'Making up for lost time' encapsulates how the students felt about their schooling experiences. They regularly put it that their schooling in Australia was always directed toward 'coping up' (catching up through extended effort). The 'lost time' refers to long periods spent away from school because of war, refugee flight and asylum—an experience variously shared by all of the students who participated.

1 RESEARCH DESIGN

1.1 Methodology

The project combined qualitative research data collected via various methods. The target population was newly arrived African refugees who are attending government high schools in Western Sydney. The secondary populations were teachers and parents/guardians.

1.1.1 Students: creative workshops

Over a period of six weeks, a series of five 50-70 minute creative workshop sessions were conducted with six groups of students (in Years 7-8 and Years 9-11, respectively) spread across three schools. Each workshop had 8-12 participants who met five times with the researchers. Table 1 lists the various creative activities undertaken during the workshops..

1.1.2 Teachers: focus group interviews and professional development workshops

Focus group interviews were conducted with fourteen teachers across the three secondary school sites. The interviews allowed teachers to identify what they see as the key issues. Supplementary teacher data was collected from four primary school teachers via one-off, semi-structured interviews at two primary schools. Additionally, two day-long professional development workshops were conducted with 90 teachers and other school staff. These were held in Bankstown and Blacktown.

1.1.3 Parents/guardians: community consultation

A one-off, two-hour consultation was conducted with sixteen parents/guardians of students. The community consultation was held at the Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre. Sixteen parents/guardians/community members attended (three mothers and one aunt, eight fathers and other community members). The participants were contacted through community liaisons. An interpreter was used for this session.

1.2 Research Themes

The project was guided by six research themes which were subject to investigation:

Transition points
- How can schools support successful transitions at the points of upper Primary to High School, and Intensive English Centre (IEC) to High School?

The Classroom
- How do African young people engage with curricular activities in the classroom and what factors help or hinder their participation?

Parents and Communities
- What aspects of schooling do parents/guardians need to know more about?
- How can the knowledge and skills of parents/guardians support teachers to improve learning outcomes?
- What are the expectations of parents/guardians about the role of language and culture in their children's education?
- How can schools effectively relate to the communities of their students?

Teachers
- What are teacher expectations regarding the learning of African students?
- How can teachers best support African students in their schools?

Pathways
- What are African young people's understandings and expectations about pathways to employment and further education?

Other School Activities
- What roles do other school activities have in educational outcomes - e.g. sport, peer relationships, school-ground interactions, canteen, school carnivals, and student representative councils?

1.2 Student participants and approach

The student workshop participants were recruited with the assistance of school staff and consisted of equal numbers of girls and boys. The researchers requested two groups of students at each school: refugee young people in Years 7-9 and Years 10-11. A combination of high, medium and low academic achievers were selected, and a mix of very new arrivals and those who had been in Australia for more than one year. The young people were overwhelmingly of Southern Sudanese (60) background, which represented Australia's

Student Workshop Activities	Theme
1. Group agreement: 'How do you want this group to function?' Each group constructed a list of guidelines about how they wanted the group to function. These included: listening, valuing each others' experiences, not judging, and the freedom to not share sensitive experiences.	**Group dynamics**
2. My path to Australia: 'Where did you live before arriving in Australia?' Place pins on each map indicating where you are from and have previously lived, and where you live now.	**Transitions**
3. Free drawing: 'What do you like about school?' Draw a picture about the things you like at school. It might be a favorite place, time of day, friends, sport etc.	**Extracurricular**
4. Circular drawing: 'What people are important to you at school?' Draw a circle with yourself in the middle and the most important people and things at school inside it. Draw the people and things you dislike at school outside the circle.	**Extracurricular**
5. Line work art (warm-up) Asked students to draw 'lines of feelings' such as happy, angry, worried, relaxed and scared using graphite sticks.	**Transitions**
6. Quick line drawings: 'How did you feel when you began school in Australia?' Asked students to remember and using line work art to draw: leaving their homeland, on the plane to Australia, first week in Australia, and their first week at school.	**Transitions**
7. Daily life: 'How did you spend time before coming to Australia?' Draw a picture of what you used to spend most of your day doing in your homeland and/or where you lived before coming to Australia.	**Transitions**
8. The perfect teacher: 'What are the characteristics of a good teacher?' A body tracing exercise where students constructed, using body outlines on large sheets of paper, model teachers based upon their classroom experiences with teachers in Australia and Africa.	**Teachers & classrooms**
9. Good teacher/bad teacher: 'How do good teachers interact with their students?' Students narrated and performed a series of plays illustrative of their positive and negative interactions with classroom teachers.	**Teachers & cassrooms**
10. African hair activity: 'What do other students think about African students?' Students took strands of paper which represented braided hair extensions and wrote responses. The students glued their strands around the sketched poster size head of an African young person.	**Extracurricular & peer perceptions**
11. Rope and stars exercise: 'What are your favorite subjects and classroom activities?' Using a rope and paper stars as a Likert scale, we surveyed students' attitudes toward subjects and classroom activities. Students physically placed themselves along the rope continuum of stars: 'strongly like' (ten stars) and 'strongly dislike' (zero stars).	**Classroom**
12. Parents/guardians and community relationships discussion: How should schools relate to your parents/guardians and communities?' In small groups students discussed with each other. Suggestions were recorded on butcher's paper.	**Parents, guardians & communities**
13. The River of Life: 'What are your plans for the future?' Students used a large felt sheet to make a 'river of life' with fabric stepping-stones to cross it. The two riverbanks represented their life now, and what they would like to be doing in ten years time. The stepping-stones showed their anticipated pathways to future plans (with steps such as education, work, relationships and family). In the river were fabric 'crocodiles' signifying the challenges which could push them off their chosen pathway.	**Pathways to further education and employment**

Table 1: Workshop activities conducted with students at each school

refugee intake priority at the time. Other participants originated from Sierra Leone (3), Somalia (1) and Senegal (1).

In Blacktown, this sample was similar to the local population of African young people on all characteristics (eg. boys and girls, of Southern Sudanese background, refugees travelling from Egypt, Kenya and Uganda). To this extent, the study presents a relatively representative sample for the Southern Sudanese young people in Western Sydney. Whereas, the participants from Sierra Leone, Somalia and Senegal were too small in number to be representative of their student population.

The workshop sessions were conducted by the researchers working with two arts facilitators: a Sudanese woman who spoke Juba Arabic, Dinka, and Shiluk, and a school teacher with extensive experience working with Southern Sudanese young people.

An arts-based approach proved ideal for working with refugee young people in a group context. Students enthusiastically expressed their ideas and feelings about research themes through paintings and drawings, drama, collage and other mediums. In this way, images were the guides which put concepts into practical form. The workshops offered a safe environment where the participants could share experiences, beliefs and attitudes in the company of people with similar backgrounds. The participants compiled a group portfolio which expressed their schooling experiences and expectations. This portfolio provided an important element of the data necessary to address the research themes.

***Left*, 2.1.1 ; Students draw pictures of how life was spent in Kakuma Refugee Camp. *Far left*, 2.1; Students begin their journey of transition from Africa to Australia and then to school.**

2 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

2.1 Transitions to school and Australia

Transitions are periods of change. Our workshop series began with students considering how commencing school in Australia was a major transition in their lives. It seemed their transitions to a new school, and between schools, were coterminous with other transitional challenges they have faced. The following sections illustrate what they shared about transitions from Africa to Australia and then to school.

2.1.1 Lifestyles in Africa

Students shared aspects of their lifestyles in Africa and journeys to Australia. During the first workshop we asked students to place coloured pins on the world map indicating where they are from and had previously lived, and where they now lived in Australia. In another exercise, the students drew pictures of how they used to spend most of their day in their homeland and/or where they lived before coming to Australia. They featured Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya which was portrayed as a place of danger—the heat and boredom, the fighting, the flies, the corruption of local authorities, and the lack of food and water.

For other students, Cairo was at the forefront of their memories. The older boys disclosed their mistreatment by unscrupulous Egyptian employers. In Cairo they did not possess the necessary funds to pay school fees and were forced to work in shocking conditions. Girls talked about household duties which compromised their access to schooling. Some older students also recalled, with mixed feelings, schooling in their homelands. The following vignettes highlight something of the students' descriptions of their lives before arriving in Australia:

1. *After going to school everyday in Sudan, one high school student fled to Egypt where he had to work twelve hours per day washing dishes in a cafeteria. He was sixteen years old. His employer paid him monthly, and sometimes he received no pay for his labour. On one occasion he was beaten by his employer and the Egyptian workers.*

2. *Another IEC student illustrated a day of her life in the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya. She recalled her experience: 'When I was in Kenya in a place called Kakuma Refugee Camp, we went to school but the problem was this, girls don't study because they are always busy fetching water and doing other work. This is UN canteen. It is a place that refugees are given their food. It is really dangerous here when people are going to take maize. Because people fight, Kenyan police cane children for no reason and also the weather is hot.'*

3. *Another IEC student shared his memories of looking after cattle in Sudan, where he did not have time to go to school. He then wrote, 'When I came to Kenya I started to go to school and in year one that is my first time to begin the school'. He is nineteen years old.*

4. *A high school student talked about his long journey to Australia. To paraphrase his story, he wrote that he was born in Southern Sudan and fled to Ethiopia when he was eight because of the war. He did not want to leave Sudan, and said that he was alone, without parents, relatives, or anyone that he knew. He joined small groups and travelled with them until they reached Ethiopia. He finally went to Kenya, a country he liked because of education and the sports facilities. He stayed in Kakuma Refugee Camp for a while, remembering that is was 'boring, hot, no food, a lot of flies, but that there are many soccer fields', and no one could stop him playing soccer. He later moved to Nairobi with an uncle before finally coming to Australia.*

5. *Another high school student remembered her life in Sierra Leone. She had to flee to a refugee camp in Guinea. She described how people from her country found it hard to live there because they 'just ate and slept and the language was hard'.*

6. *One high school student from Sierra Leone said he went through Year 12 at school and spoke English sometimes. Then he fled to Guinea, which he called 'The bad place'. In Guinea, he could not go to school and just slept. As he put it, 'there was a lot of trickery everywhere'.*

7. *An IEC student worked in a shop in Cairo. He drew a detailed pencil drawing of himself behind the shop counter and a car and tall building nearby. Then he added text, 'I worked with my friend in this shop but I am not happy because I got $30 and my friend got $50. He was Egyptian.'*

2.1.2 Early experiences in Australian schools

Usually one or two months after arriving in Australia all of the students enrolled in an IEC, and then later high schools. In this regard, their IEC initially represented schooling in

***Far left, Lifestyles in Africa* - IEC student's memory of life in Sudan, where he did not have time to go to school.**
***Left, Early Experiences* - A Year 8 high school student's depiction of how she felt upon leaving her homeland.**

Australia. To explore students' early experiences in Australian schools we used an approach called 'line-drawing' in which the students, using graphite sticks, drew and shaded 'lines of feelings' such as happy, angry, worried, relaxed and scared. For instance, a fuzzy line might relate to the feeling of confusion. The students used this method to draw how they felt during their first week at school.

The students' work and accompanying comments illustrated the range of challenges and emotions they experienced when entering Australian schools for the first time. The schools, they said, were entirely new in structure and culture. Especially highlighted were the changing ways that teachers interacted with students, and the kinds of student-centred activities that featured. Most of the students had not been inside a school for several years, while others had never attended school. Their types of experiences would be familiar to any student entering school for the first time. However, they are pronounced for young African students—with their backgrounds of interrupted schooling and refugee flight. Students' experiences beginning school included:

1. *One high school student (Year 10) described feeling sad when he left Sudan, but said he was happy on the aeroplane to Australia. He experienced a range of emotions when arriving in Australia, commenting, 'I missed my homeland'. But his first week at school was exciting and made him 'forget' about his homeland.*

2. *Another high school student (Year 10) remembered being happy leaving her homeland and arriving in Australia, but was 'frustrated' and 'angry' during her first week at school.*

3. *A Year 7 high school student reflected on leaving his homeland Sierra Leone. He wrote, 'I am very very angry'. On the plane, he said he was both 'worried' and 'relaxed'. During his first week in Australia he recalled being 'happy'.*

4. *A Year 8 high school student said upon leaving her homeland, 'I felt sad when I left my friends, relatives, grandmother and my aunt, little kids who used to play with me when I was a little baby…' She described her first week at school as a mix of emotions, being 'worried', 'very good', and 'angry' at the same time.*

5. *An IEC student (aged fifteen) made a pencil drawing of a school with many stick figures outside. Then she wrote of her first week at school, 'I was alone but I was happy for the better education I will get in Australia.'*

These snapshots illustrate the range of emotions students felt when arriving in Australia and setting foot in their schools for the first time. As one student summed up, 'The first day I joined school in Sydney, I felt sad, depressed, worried and lost because I didn't understand anything'.

2.1.3 Changing from an IEC to high school

While the IEC mediated Australian schooling to new arrivals during their first year of settlement, many of the participants in this project had since exited IECs and moved on to high school. They reported high schools as patently different from IECs. The students said that, for various reasons, the transition from an IEC to high school was perhaps their most troubling period since arriving in Australia. Evidently, the transition is a source of difficulty.

It seems that successful IEC students often begin high school with great expectations but quickly find themselves unable to cope with the degree of academic 'catching-up' (or, as they put it, 'coping-up') required to manage the workload. In general, while smart, they often do not have the foundational knowledge base (especially in relation to cultural literacy and analytical methods). This was particularly so for the older students who made the transition from an IEC to Year 10.

Students described the challenges of learning another school structure, becoming a new student again, and learning skills and classroom activities in the context of high school. The main source of anxiety was the speed at which they were expected to 'cope-up' and adjust to high school classrooms and curricular activities. Also, compared with large high schools, students idealised the fact that their IEC provided an environment where they received high levels of individualised support in a smaller class. The following points summarise the difficulties:

- Students felt that Australian-born students do not have the same appreciation of other cultures as IEC students.
- Students said they needed more help in learning English at high school.
- Students described the difficulty of finding their way around high school buildings to different classrooms.
- Students said that their peers in high school were of different backgrounds, but they were not new to Australia 'like everyone is in the IEC'.
- Students felt their high school teachers did not understand their accents, so they remained quiet in class because they were not understood.

The research highlighted varying experiences across the three schools. The IEC students were generally positive about their schools and felt a sense of community and belonging to a tightly knit group of peers. The majority of students were of Southern Sudanese background, and, belonging to the Dinka group, they shared a common language and all knew of each others' families. In contrast with the larger and more multicultural high school setting, the IEC context was considered a safe space in which students could begin their schooling in Australia. Although, in the context of shared IEC/high school grounds, some IEC students spoke of Australian-born high school students singling them out at recess and lunch time with derogatory comments such as 'dumb IECs' who 'can't speak English'.

Along these lines, the high school students in this study spoke about fighting and dealing with racism on a regular basis. They provided numerous examples of playground bullying which highlight the difficulties of making the transition from the apparently 'safe' IEC environment to the 'hostile' high school setting. High school students spoke of friends from their earlier time at the IEC later 'dropping out' of high school because they were unhappy. Some of these students had done very well at the IEC.

Tied to student attrition are issues related to age and family composition. Many of the high school students who participated in this study are young adults (aged over 18 years and up to 22) undertaking Years 9, 10 or 11. They talked about the frustrations of dealing with much younger and 'immature' classmates on a day-to-day basis. Unlike their school peers, many of the African students have adult responsibilities outside of school. For instance, one high school student aged 18 years in Year 9 (who attended school for the first time at the age of 17) is the primary caregiver for his younger niece and nephew. Another student was aged 20 years and completing Year 10. He was frustrated by class peers who were four years younger than him. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that African refugees may be older than their travel documents state. As students described to us, in the refugee camps they often understated their age to ensure their families stayed together. So a student aged eighteen years on their travel document may actually be 21 years old.

Students said that high schools need to make it easier for new African students moving from IECs who feel anxious, often have no friends, and are confused by the different buildings and rooms. As one student complained: 'I always get lost changing classes with different subjects'. Students suggested simple things like having clear arrows and signs to places of importance for the new students, such as toilets. Students also said they were confused by school rules and wanted to get copies of them 'on paper'. Timetables on paper were also considered a necessity.

At each school covered in this project students said they found a 'buddy system' helped them negotiate the structure of the school and generally develop a network of friends. They recalled being assigned a buddy on their first day of school. Students said it was helpful if that 'buddy' was from the same or a similar linguistic/cultural background as themselves.

However, some students felt that their 'buddies' did not support them for a long enough period.

More conscious attention to the selection of 'buddies' who are caring and supportive is important. Students also mentioned that they are quite willing to act as 'buddies', typically saying, 'We'd really like to do that. If someone new comes we'll show them around'. A sense of camaraderie, community, and caring generally exists among newly arrived students. On his first day at school one IEC student reflected, 'I was not scared. I felt very good … because I have a good friend. I used to have fun with him. So I never felt lonely'.

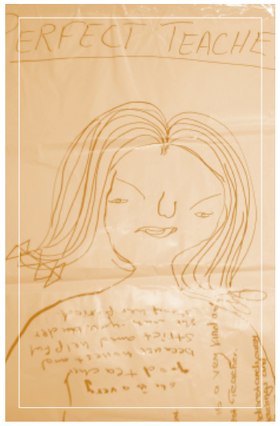
The students at one high school have developed a monthly African Community Lunch, where the students meet, talk, and enjoy each others' company. The students are generally aged over eighteen years and on average have been living in Australia for a longer period of time than many of the IEC and high school students involved in the study. Their efforts at bringing together a network of African students suggest that ongoing peer groups introduce a powerful means of support for students in transition.

2.2 Students' experiences at school

The students had definite opinions about school. Typically, they identified particular teachers who made it easier for them to learn. Students also talked about their preferred subjects and learning activities. They also had ideas about how schools can assist their parents/guardians and communities to be more involved in their education. These themes are developed below.

2.2.1 Teachers

We conducted a workshop session on the theme of 'teachers'. The students designed and performed plays about 'good teachers' and 'bad teachers'. They also participated in an exercise where they constructed—using body outlines on large sheets of paper—model teachers based upon their classroom experiences in Australia and Africa. Both the plays and body outlines conveyed depictions of perfect and not-so-perfect teachers. Overall they encapsulated the importance of the character of teachers. In terms of characteristics, 'bad teachers' were seen as confrontational and meted out punishment without listening to students. But the students said they also felt confused by teachers who were 'always trying to be friendly' while simultaneously wanting to assert authority over them. For instance, a teacher might share a joke like a friend and then ask the student to 'tuck your shirt in'.
Good teachers were seen as conciliatory and empathetic, while remaining firm and in control of the class. They were also able to provide a pencil, pen or paper when needed. As the students put it:



Left, *Teachers* - 'A model teacher', based upon a student's classroom experience in Australia and Africa.

'Good' teachers are:

helping
friendly
advisers
firm but fair
giving you time to think
not speaking too quickly
giving handouts that can be reviewed at home
not provoking confrontations

High school students said they often did not understand what their teachers were talking about, especially their instructions for homework which are often rushed at the end of class. However, they were reluctant to ask for clarification for fear of looking 'dumb'. Various students said they were quiet in class because they felt their teachers could not easily understand their accents. In this regard, they liked teachers who prepared handouts so students could later take more time to understand what had been taught and discussed in the classroom.

The 'teacher' workshop displayed the strong distaste students have for confrontational teachers. The students respect teachers who remain composed and use a calming voice when behavioural difficulties arise. The students want firm teachers who set clear boundaries and remain coolheaded under pressure. This came across with all of the groups. Students provided numerous examples of stand-offs between unnerved teachers and African students. As acted out in their plays, the episodes involved teachers yelling at them, staring them in the face, and asking them to leave the classroom. The stand-offs revolved around issues such as students not doing homework, talking in class, their mobile phones ringing and students being late for class. The students considered teachers' verbal clashes with them counter-productive because they often resulted in violent student outbursts or sent the student into a 'shell' of silence. One student declared, 'After the teacher yelled at me I decided that I would never say anything again in his class'. Other students said they ceased going to some classes following confrontations with teachers because, 'it was a waste of time'. Other confrontations resulted in students storming out of the classroom.

The students wanted teachers to understand that some young refugees from Africa are very stressed and may not cope well when a teacher confronts them. They might offer resistance to their teachers' verbal volleys and put up a fight. Students considered such response a learned behaviour that was formerly necessary for their own survival in dangerous situations before arriving in Australia. Consequently, when threatened in the classroom, newly arrived students may react in unpredictable ways. Many students stated that they needed to fight when challenged. They disliked confrontation but would not back away from it.

2.2.2 Classroom learning

The students said they were open to a variety of classroom activities and were flexible in their learning styles. They stated that computers, sport, group work, and tactile activities were tools which helped them learn better by participating. However, various students also said they liked spending time in the library and working alone—especially the girls.

Most students said they enjoyed copying from the board because it allows them to review the copied material at home, perhaps with the assistance of a friend or older family member. Copying also allowed them time-out from the rigours of learning in a second or third language.

Using a rope and paper stars as a Likert scale, we surveyed students' attitudes toward subjects, learning and classroom activities. Students physically placed themselves along the rope continuum of stars: 'strongly like' (ten stars) and 'strongly dislike' (no stars) to indicate what worked and what did not work for them. They ranked, from a list, the activities they liked the most. Figure 1 is a compilation of student responses.

Group work and working on the computer ranked highly across all three schools, with over 60 percent of students stating they 'strongly liked' those activities. A large section of students said they 'liked' or 'strongly liked' working alone, copying from the board, reading, writing, and talking or giving speeches in class (though a number of students said they 'strongly disliked' this activity).

Using computers was the activity students said they most enjoyed at school. Typical comments were: 'I like computers', 'computers are good', and 'I always practise quick typing'. Students were far less enthused about working on projects (unless it involved computers), with a slight majority suggesting they 'strongly disliked' this activity. This may suggest that students require much more explicit instruction in how to undertake projects.

A considerable number of students said they often experienced difficulties locating project handouts at home and returning them to the class. In short, it was not uncommon for them to misplace important assessment material at home, particularly single pieces of paper

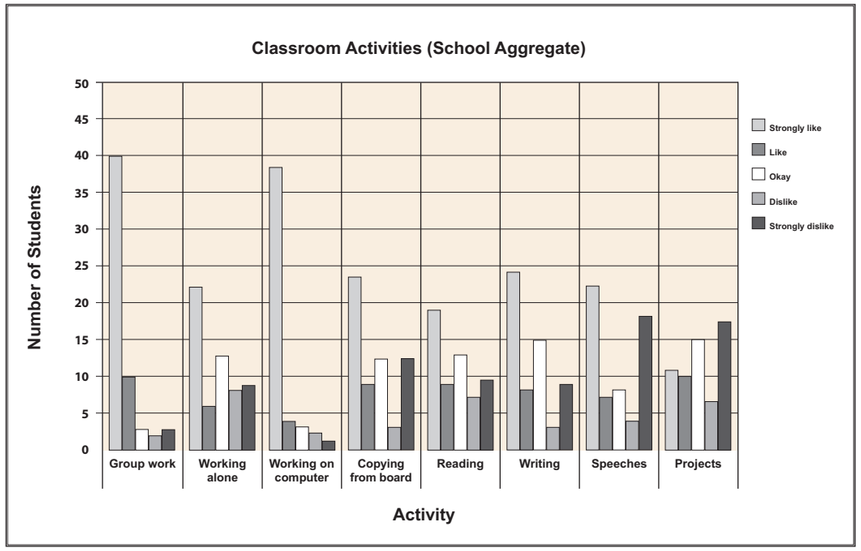


Figure 1: Students' preferred classroom activities: school aggregate

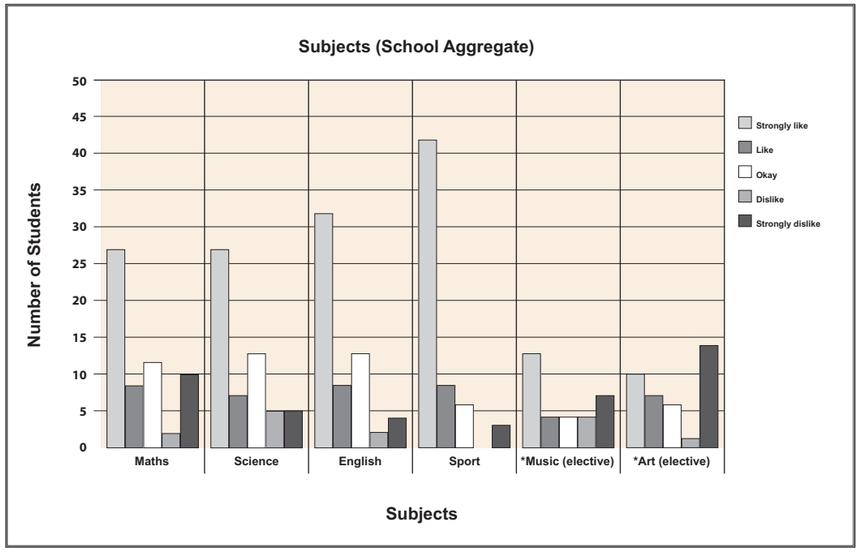


Figure 2: Students' preferred subjects: school aggregate

distributed by classroom teachers. Most attributed this to younger siblings regularly trashing their bags and school equipment. Most of the students lived in crowded households and found it difficult to undertake school projects at home. The girls talked about the demands of combining study with child care duties.

We also asked students about the subjects they liked studying and those they disliked. Figure 2 shows their responses. Over 60 percent of students said they 'strongly liked' PDHP (Sport). Both boys and girls said they loved sporting activities, particularly soccer, basketball and swimming. They stressed that sport helped them to make friends at school. During workshop activities, the younger boys often drew pictures of themselves playing soccer and basketball, shooting a goal past the goal keeper or through the hoop.

More than 50 percent of students stated they 'strongly liked' English, followed by Mathematics and Science. We received a variety of responses regarding the elective subjects of Music and Art. It was surprising that students were ambivalent about Art, given their positive responses to this project's art-based workshops. When quizzed why they preferred particular subjects, students typically stated 'the teacher' was the most important factor for their subject success and enjoyment.

2.2.3 Family and community involvement

In small groups students discussed how schools could effectively liaise with their parents/guardians and communities. Suggestions were recorded on butcher's paper. Overwhelmingly, the students wanted schools to seek the advice of their communities when developing strategies for newly arrived students. This was especially the case with senior students without parents/guardians. By 'community', they primarily referred to the local network of family groups to which they belong—which are often tied to ethnic affiliations, such as Dinka or Acholi. But some also referred to formal community associations, although most had little to do with them.

Most students thought there was very little connection between their school and their community. To remedy this they suggested schools invite community representatives to 'give a speech' and 'to give awards'. It was felt that schools needed to learn more about Africa and their countries of origin, and that this could happen by inviting community leaders to schools. One student suggested organising sports events with some community participation. As a start, students thought it best for schools to just begin talking with parents/guardians and their communities. Here the emphasis was upon building good will.

The students suggested the strategy of schools liaising with 'the community' to resolve difficulties. As they put it, this was 'the correct way' to deal with problems. Sometimes dealing directly with the young person's parents/guardians is inadequate because the family is situated as part of a complex web of communal obligations based around ethnic, clan and language ties.

Student responses highlight a preference for mediation via a third party. This is particularly so when the student's guardians are unable to speak English, or are too frightened to deal with authorities. Our participants spoke of the roles some elders in the community should

play because they bring cultural expertise to a situation. But they only wanted elders who would listen to young people. Ambiguously, they seemingly desired to be independent from their own communities, while at the same time speaking of 'the community' as their surrogate families. This was especially so among the students who were orphaned young people without relatives in Australia.

2.2.4 Attitudes to school life

Throughout workshop activities the IEC students tended to represent their schools as the most significant place in their lives. They were generally idealistic about their schools. Indicative remarks were: 'school is our life', 'I love my school so much' and 'I like school because it is the way to future. Two representative quotes are:

> *I like my school very much and I like all the teachers and my friends too I like maths too because is my favorite subject and because I want to be a good engener [sic] for my life and I like to play soccer with my friends at a school and I like reading a story about Australia.*
>
> ***(IEC student, aged 15)***

> *I love my school because is very good and I think it's very good I love my friend at school and my teacher. I like computer room I love Sudan so much.*
>
> ***(IEC student, aged 14)***

By comparison the high school students were equivocal. While some patently enjoyed school, most were finding it very difficult. As mentioned earlier, the transition from IEC to high school often corresponded with changing attitudes toward school. Throughout the project there were few high school students who spoke positively and optimistically about schooling. However, this should not be taken as their devaluing of education, rather it suggests an appreciation of the difficulties they face 'catching-up' in mainstream high school. Accordingly, most were determined to continue with their education.

The students drew pictures about the things they liked at school. We encouraged them to consider extracurricular aspects of schooling like: their favourite place at school, time of day, friends, and sport. We also asked them to draw a circle with themselves in the middle and the most important people and things at school inside it. They then drew the things they disliked about school outside the circle.

Students said 'having friends' was the most important school feature outside the classroom. Tied to this was a like for lunchtime and sitting in the playground. Catching the bus to school was also rated by various students as a highlight of their day. One student drew the school bus in detail. Presumably time on the bus provided an opportunity to see friends. Another student drew a picture of herself and two other school girls sitting together. She labelled it: 'Me and my friends'. Others stated:

- 'I like meeting new people'
- 'I like discussing in the playground'
- 'I like to talk to people'
- 'I like chatting with other friends: "Hi how are you?" "I am good thanks and you?"'
- 'I like to sit in a group with friends on the grass'
- 'I like having different friends of other races'
- 'Friendship is too important to everyone in life'

Visiting the school library was also fondly spoken of by students. They drew detailed pictures of their school libraries. Inside were computers and books with students walking around. Some shaped the library like a large house with a roof. The library was conveyed as an enjoyable place of quiet reflection and learning: 'I like reading stories and magazines in the library', 'I like sitting in the library', 'I like listening to music in the library', and 'I like the library'.

Across the IECs and high schools the Sudanese students were keen to express their attachment to the 'new Sudan' flag. In fact, 32 students drew the 'new Sudan' flag in their circle containing the most important people and things at school. They meticulously colored their flags red, green, white and black. Evidently, they wanted Sudan to intersect with their list of school 'likes' with comments such as: 'I love my Sudan', 'I like Australia but I still love my country', and 'I like my flag'.

Turning to what students said they did not like about school, again there were common themes. In the high schools, teachers were singled out. The common response was 'some teachers' or the more generative 'I don't like the teachers'. Tied to this was dislike among the high school students for detentions, homework and assignments. Other responses were: 'unfriendly people', 'fighting', 'enemies' and 'bullies'. One student simply stated: 'I don't like trouble'. The IEC students were reluctant to identify dislikes and none of them directed criticism toward their teachers. However, they did indicate difficulties in the shared school grounds with high school students.

2.2.5 Intercultural exchanges and associations among students

During one workshop we specifically explored the theme of student exchanges around school—a topic that frequently arose throughout the project. As discussed above, students quickly wanted to make new friends at school and most were comfortable with a diversity

of friends. They wanted cultural transactions which taught them about other students. For instance, the students' circular drawings illustrating the most important people to them at school featured friends from a diversity of backgrounds. Typically students listed their friends' names and nationalities/ethnicities. Some even drew their friends' national flags.

In terms of overall student populations, the high schools were more diverse than the IECs. At the time of the project, most newly enrolled IEC students were of Sudanese backgrounds, whereas high school students from a diversity of backgrounds 'rubbed shoulders' in their classrooms and school grounds. One workshop activity was not sufficient for in-depth exploration of how different students negotiate their daily lives together—this should be subject to further research. But it did serve to gauge the kinds of interactions occurring and to measure African students' impressions and feelings about their non-African peers at school. In this respect, what follows is a short description of some student-to-student dynamics playing out across three schools. It is not an attempt to explain complex interactions.

The presence of significant numbers of black skinned students in the school is new to fellow students and teachers. The students who participated in our study were aware of the gaze of non-African students upon them and they were equivocal about this. They described the attention as a source of pride and frustration. Some viewed it as curiosity and something positive, particularly when it related to sporting prowess or beautiful hair. Alternatively, they grew tired of answering repetitive questions about how they looked, such as: 'Why are you black?'; 'Why does your nose look like that?'; 'How do you make extension hair?'; 'Why is your hair short?'; 'Why don't you have hair like us?' and 'Does your skin get burnt in the sun?'

The high school students were unequivocal about racist practices at their schools. They portrayed their non-African peers (and some teachers) as lacking cultural understanding and 'respect' for African people. As one student put it: 'At high school, students and teachers don't understand our cultures'. He contrasted this with the sensitivity shown by IEC staff and students. At the same time, the students did not want to make a commotion about 'racism' in their schools. Evidently, compared with their harsh pre-arrival experiences in Cairo, Kampala, Kakuma and the like, they considered racist behaviour at school a nuisance they could live with.

Students repeated (sometimes word-for-word) the kinds of racialised innuendo and slurs directed at them in school grounds and sometimes in their classrooms. Students said direct racial aspersions were most commonly cast by 'New Zealand students' (an umbrella label for Pacific Islanders) who 'wanted to fight'.

Both boys and girls across the project groups said they had previously fought with other students who acted in racist ways toward them. In general, they would not back away from a fight and considered attack the best form of defence, and this included using racist taunts themselves. Some said this worked and gave examples. As one student recalled, 'The boys here at lunch time they called us "dirty blacks" when we first started here [high school], so we fighted [sic] them and then they stopped. They don't trouble us now ... we even play football together'.

Some of the older high school students aged over 18 years were more considered in their responses. They demonstrated the capacity to critically deconstruct stereotypes and wanted to discuss them during the workshops. At the same time, they were very conscious of racist practices in their schools and linked this to wider Australian society.

We investigated what students considered their non-African peers attitudes toward them. To do so the students took long strands of paper representing braided hair extensions and wrote responses on them to the statement: 'What other students think about African students …' The students glued their strands around the sketched poster size head of an African young person. We then discussed the image and the messages it conveyed. Their responses ran across a spectrum of stereotypes about Africans held by their non-African peers. The following selected statements indicate the range of pejorative responses:

- *'They think we looking different'*
- *'They think that we walk around naked with animals in Africa'*
- *'Some people think that Africans are monsters or animals'*
- *'Some of them think that we are all the same'*
- *'People think that African people don't know how to speak English and also they are different from normal people'*
- *'People think black people are ugly'*
- *'Cannot attain a degree since their lifes are full of fight on streets'*
- *'The other students think that students from Africa know nothing about school.'*
- *'They also take us as a simple things'*
- *'They think that you have no food in your country'*
- *'Most other students think being African (black) means poor person without education'*
- *'They think we are drug adik'*
- *'They think African are stupid not enthusiasm or flexible in study'*
- *'They think that African are gangs because wearing USA cloths and USA cultures'*
- *'They think we too poor'*
- *'In Africa no school'*
- *'They think African students are not smart but we are!'*

Far left, *Pathways to the future.*
Left, *Students' steps to the future.*

Contrasting these were responses which indicated a fascination with imagined archetypal African physical traits:

- *'They think our hair is cool'*
- *'They want to dance like us'*
- *'Some people think that Africans are cool, good at basketball and soccer'*
- *'They think we can jump very high'*
- *'They think we are good looking'*
- *'They get jealous of the African student because the girls love them'*
- *'Africans are good at fighting'*
- *'Some think they are good running'*
- *'Some think that they are cool'*
- *'They think we are like home boys'*

In summary, we found that students enjoy intercultural contact and were quite accustomed to it before they entered Australian schools. Many years spent in refugee camps and large urban centres such as Cairo have ensured the normalising of difference. In other words, cultural difference has become somewhat incidental. Similarly schools should endeavour to normalise difference without imposing 'harmony' upon their student community. The students intimated that racism was not separate from cultural harmony, rather, in a contradictory way the two will never totally displace each other. Given that, schools should aim to 'scaffold' the inclusion of African students into their civic (student) lives via simple steps such as inviting them to share at assembly, further promoting buddy systems and educating other students about Africa. This may entail teachers seeking out opportunities to teach about Africa within their teaching programs across the key learning areas.

2.3 Pathways to the Future

The final student workshop was guided by the theme 'pathways to the future'. Students used a large felt sheet to make a 'river of life' with fabric stepping-stones to cross it. The two riverbanks represented their lives now, and what they would like to be doing ten years later. The stepping-stones showed their anticipated pathways to the future (with steps such as education, work, relationships and family). In the river were fabric 'crocodiles' which signified the challenges that could push them off their chosen pathway. Their textile creations then informed a discussion about pathways to the future.

The 'river of life' was probably the most popular exercise conducted with students. They enjoyed the opportunity to reflect upon their future and to map it out in front of them using fabric, scissors and glue. The exercise showed that all students had future plans of one kind or another, and they considered education important to their success. Most students expected to complete their HSC, go on to university and then enter the workforce. In general, students' plans encompassed tensions between working for money, education, family obligations, future expectations and present difficulties. As one student stated: 'I like school because it is the way to my future, but I must help my family'.

2.3.1 Students' steps to the future

The older students (Years 10-11) at each school provided more detail about their proposed pathways than their younger counterparts (Years 7-9). This was perhaps because many of the older students had previously undertaken paid work. For example, some of the older boys spent up to five years working menial low-paid jobs in Cairo. They were quite focused on getting back to work again and earning better money.

As Figure 3 illustrates, a series of 23 occupations were envisaged by students. The high status profession of medical doctor featured, followed by lawyer and nurse. Only four students planned to work in trade areas (mechanic, construction and electrician) and they were all boys, whereas 23 named professions requiring university education. Other occupational goals would be reached by way of TAFE, including childcare, hairdresser, information technology, and truck driver.

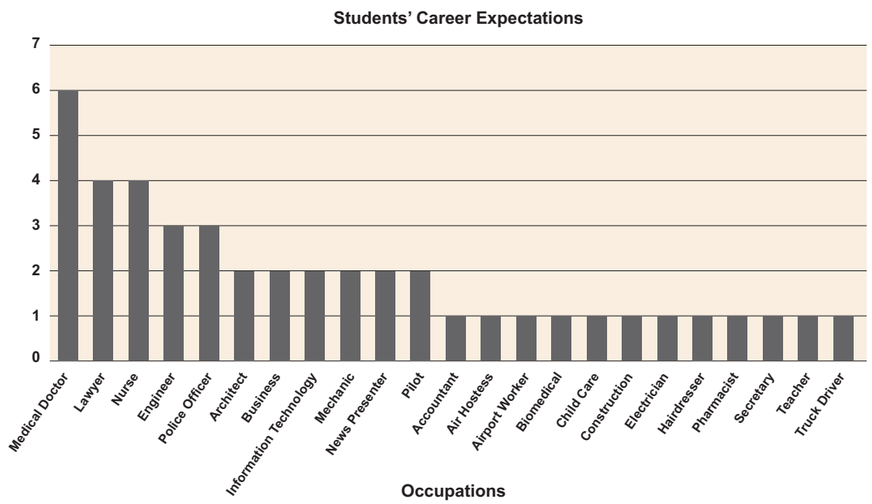


Figure 3: Students' preferred occupations: school aggregate

Some students hoped their careers would enable them to help society, their families, and communities. In every group, there was somebody who wanted to become a social justice advocate—typically through a legal profession. For instance, an IEC student aspired to advocate for human rights at the United Nations.

The following abbreviated examples provide a sketch of selected students' plans and hopes.

1. A high school student (aged 20) hoped to finish Year 10, go to TAFE and obtain transport qualifications. He would then work as a truck driver and, with the money earned, go back to Sudan for a visit to find a wife. Then he would return and sponsor her migration to Australia.

2. An IEC student (aged 18) thought that she might fail Year 11, but would go to TAFE to train as a nurse. Aware of financial difficulties, she would also get a part time job to help with fees and living costs.

3. A high school student (aged 21) was formerly a mechanic in Sierra Leone. He wants to continue being a mechanic. He will complete Year 10. 'Then', as he put it, 'I will do TAFE to go get my Certificate and look for apprentice mechanic. When I finish TAFE I will look for a full time job. I will make a visit to my family in Sierra Leone. Then I will look for a good woman to marry. Then start a new life and have a house … get children. Later on I want to become a businessman in life … me and family'.

4. One IEC student (aged 18) stated: 'My path is simple. I want to do Year 10, Year 11, Year 12, go to TAFE and then be a nurse'. Her first crocodile, at the Year 10 stage, was 'homework'. She was scared of homework and felt it to be too hard. We asked how she was going to deal with this problem. 'I don't know', she responded. She had no strategies in mind for dealing with the barrier to her progress. We informed her of homework support groups based at the Migrant Resource Centre in Parramatta and suggested they would help. She was keen but said she needed help to travel to the groups.

5. Another IEC student (aged 22) had already completed one year of university study in Sudan. We asked where she would go after leaving the IEC. She responded, 'I'm not going to high school … I am too old for that. I'm going to TAFE and getting accounting, and work it out from there'.

6. A high school student (aged 21) said when he finishes school he's going to TAFE to do engineering. And then he will find a job, get married and have children.

7. Another high school student (aged 19) planned to complete Year 12 in 2005. He also wants to participate in the Sudanese Youth Association. In 2006-7 he plans to go to TAFE to study social science 'or other criteria for further studies'. He said he would also need to find a part-time job. In 2008 he hopes to visit his mother in Sudan and his grandmother in America. In 2009-10 he plans to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree and then move on to completing a Bachelor of Law degree. Finally, in 2015, he expressed his desire to eventually become a lawyer and get married.

Exploring pathways highlighted the tensions and complex loyalties experienced by young African refugees settling in Australia. Most of the older students, and some of the younger ones, placed their personal and work goals alongside obligations toward people remaining in their home country or places of asylum.

Overwhelmingly, students said their overall goal was a 'happy life'. For example a high school student said, 'I just want to get some work and have a family and be happy'. Like him, others simply wanted peace, security and happiness. Generally this entailed reconnecting with loved ones and becoming part of a family again: 'I want to reach happiness in 2007'; 'I want my life to be happy'; 'I want to visit my country'; 'Visit some friends and relatives'; 'Help my family'; 'Bring my family together'; 'I want to marry and I want to have two children', and 'I need children'.

Through the 'river of life' exercise students demonstrated the capacity to foresee difficulties and challenges they would face on various fronts. In terms of obstacles, the most often cited was having inadequate money to pursue both their career pathways and to help their relatives. The need to send money to relatives remaining in dangerous situations was a consideration for nearly all of the students (junior and senior). As one 14 year old girl described: 'When I finish high school I have to look for job to help people in Kakuma refugee camp'. Related to financial difficulties were fears of unemployment: 'No job', 'No good job', 'Not enough money', or 'No job, no money'.

In general, the senior students said they were working part time and, in some instances, full time. They talked about the priority to 'pay off debts to get out here' (to Australia) and to send money to relatives overseas. In particular, most of the students who entered Australia under the Special Humanitarian Program (Visa Subclass 202) were compelled to promptly pay off thousands of dollars owed to their proposers (typically relatives and friends) who funded their pre-departure medical and travel costs. Students said this was a source of stress during their first year of settlement which made it hard to study.

Despite their work commitments, students felt strongly about the importance of education to their lives. One senior girl remarked, 'I will never give up school, even if I am working till

late at night … I'll come to school everyday'. Another student said he was regularly, '… out till two o'clock working and then coming to school the next day'.

Students were anxious about low marks or 'bad results'. Nearly all cited this as a likely obstacle which could derail their plans. Frequent reference was made to the fear of 'bad' HSC results. Some students signalled trauma as a factor which may prevent them from achieving good academic results. One student speculated: 'When I am still in university maybe I may find it hard to help give money to my family and I may think of war'.

2.3.2 Girls' obligations

Twenty-four girls and twelve boys judged 'getting married and having children' as their most important life goal. Three of the older IEC girls said they intended to marry after finishing English classes, and have children shortly afterwards.

The obligations placed upon some girls often lead to difficult choices. One student (aged twenty) wanted to go overseas, 'work for the UN', and advocate human rights for Africans. She was completing her second term at an IEC and thought about 'going to Canberra to study' after high school. However, she felt her older sister (who sponsored her migration to Australia) expected her to marry after finishing at the IEC. Anyhow, the student felt she could not leave her sister until she marries. As she put it, 'In my culture, you get married, you've got your husband and he will take care of you'. In this context, if she was accepted to university, then going to Canberra meant separation from her family. She added, 'You want to know the one thing that I want most in the world? It's for my whole family to be together. I don't think that is ever going to happen ... but it would be really nice'.

Like the above student, most girls said they wanted to undertake further education and demonstrated professional ambitions. At the same time, they also recognised how getting married and having children in their early-twenties would likely interrupt their educational pathways. Nevertheless, they would defer educational ambitions to raise children and undertake family duties.

3 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

While the students' perceptions were the focal point of our investigation, additional consultations were conducted with teachers. We aimed to gather their views about the transitions of African young people into their classrooms and schools. Across the schools, teachers were enthusiastic about the project and generous with their time and comments.

Based upon their responses, our interest here is to provide an outline of how teachers are supporting the educational endeavours of newly arrived African students, and the issues teachers said they needed to know more about. The research did not aim to explore specific teaching strategies in great depth. Rather, we asked teachers to describe how they are settling new students into their schools and classrooms. Additionally, we asked teachers to identify gaps for program development and further research.

3.1 Knowing your students

Teachers wanted to understand more about their students' backgrounds and communities. High school teachers said the provision of more background information about students transferring from IECs would help them to earlier identify particular student learning and behavioural issues in the classroom. Whereas IEC staff have access to considerable information about specific students and their contexts of arrival and settlement, high school teachers felt they received limited information. As one teacher put it:

> *… if the teachers [high school] knew where these students were coming from, what they've had in their background, their country, the trauma that they've been through, then I think they could cater for them a lot better. I mean, a lot of that information I think IECs are privy to and high schools aren't, and I think that could really help high school teachers to be able to support the students as much as we can and know where they're coming from and what they've been through … to sort of help guide them as much as you can.*
>
> **(high school teacher)**

Additionally, high school teachers wanted to learn more about the cultural contrasts between Africa and Australia, which they considered would help them in relating to students.

Some teachers were attentive to trauma related issues among their African students. For instance, one high school teacher spoke of the need for teachers to ensure that audio-visual materials (e.g. video documentaries) viewed in the classroom do not contain inappropriate

images which could trigger traumatic responses among students with refugee backgrounds. Adverse images could include war scenes, shootings, or frames of dead bodies. He reasoned that more in-depth background information about African students would help staff identify trauma-sensitive teaching approaches. Reflecting on his experience teaching African young people, he explained:

> *Trauma is a big issue that a lot of teachers do not understand. My students… they were saying that sometimes they get flashbacks or thoughts come into their head and they completely switch off to the lesson … and they were saying that they want teachers to understand that sometimes thoughts and memories just come back … and they feel uncomfortable.*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

Most teachers were aware that students' parents/guardians often have similar trauma related difficulties and no schooling experiences behind them. Additionally, they recognised that many students are from single-parent families. In other words, teachers are aware that African students are entering NSW public schools under considerable stress.

3.2 Knowing students' families

Unlike the IEC teachers we surveyed, their high school colleagues were experiencing minimal success communicating with students' families. By and large, high schools were less flexible than IECs. For instance, senior staff at one high school insisted they did not have the capacity to provide alternate communications with African families. Instead, they insisted, families needed to quickly adapt to the school's communication systems (primarily sending home written notices with students).

Some high school staff were frustrated by an apparent absence of participation from African parents/guardians in extra-curricular school activities such as Harmony Day. A few put this down to a lack of interest on the part of the African parents. As one high school teacher complained:

> *We have found a lot of the parents don't want to come. Some of the parents we're trying to get up to school, we're working with the counsellors and things to try and get them to come and talk to us … and they don't want to come.*
>
> **(high school teacher)**

Other teachers felt the apparent lack of participation was related to feelings of fear and lack of English language competence among parents/guardians. One IEC teacher stated:

> *A lot of parents they'll leave everything to you. You'll contact them about some problem and they'll respond as if to say: "Well, why are you asking me? I don't know Australia. I don't know English"… They don't often think that they have the skills to have a role.*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

Teachers across the three schools said they had insufficient knowledge to confidently deal with new families. They felt confused by the composition of their students' families and unsure who they should deal with when issues arise. For instance, the families of Southern Sudanese refugees in Australia are generally large and extended.

DIMIA 2003-04 IHSS statistics show that NSW received the highest proportion of large refugee families (five or more). 278 refugee families with five or more members settled in NSW during 2003-04 (DIMIA 2004: 31). More than half of these people are of Southern Sudanese background and living in metropolitan Western Sydney (specifically the Blacktown and Fairfield areas).

Among the participants in our study it was common for their families to be headed by single mothers (typically widows). Many families lost their senior male figures (fathers and uncles) during the armed conflicts in their respective regions. The DIMIA database identifies 15 percent of IHSS assisted case/families as 'Single Parent Families', and 2% of cases are 'Children Only'. The number of 'Woman at Risk' entrants in NSW totalled 52—presumably most of these are single mothers.

As a consequence of war and displacement, schools are likely to be dealing with widowed mothers, aunts or older siblings who are family heads. However, many mothers and aunts do not speak enough English so the oldest children often take responsibility for school liaison.

Staff at one IEC described how the majority of their students lived with their mothers. Nonetheless, whenever they invite parents/guardians to school fathers and uncles outnumber mothers and aunts. Again, this highlights the mismatch of female-headed households in a male dominated community. On the home front, mothers and female guardians are carrying the responsibility, however, in their own communities, fathers and uncles are variously granted authority.

Probably one quarter of the students who participated in this project are orphans. Some said they lived independently or moved between relatives' houses. A few entered Australia under the 'Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors' (UHM) category. They are persons under the age of 18 who have been granted a visa under the Humanitarian Program and do not

have a parent to care for them in Australia, but may have close relatives over the age of 21 to provide care and support (DIMIA 2004:5). Five of the older students who participated in this project said they provided care and support to younger relatives without parents. Conversely, there were 16 students aged under 18 years who said they receive care and support from older relatives.

Another category of participants were those who experienced conflict within their families after settling in Australia and now live independently. One student in this category claimed to be homeless.

The absence of adult males in families was frequently raised by the teachers whom we surveyed. One IEC teacher described the difficulties:

> *You've got female-headed families in a male-dominated society [Southern Sudanese community], which means that a lot of the problems are at home because the kids are acting out to mum, and there's no adult male at all there … So these kids, they're acting out at home and the mum's lost control at home. Sometimes I think the problems are just so big for these mums. And on top of that we're saying "This kid's got problems at school".*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

Another IEC teacher highlighted the absence of fathers:

> *If you look at our students' families, there is a handful that have got a father figure in the family. Mostly it's just mum and the kids. I think we have one or two families that have got a mother and father, and the rest … there's hardly any that have a father.*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

English language difficulties often prevented teachers' effective communication with students' families. Teachers were concerned about parents/guardians (particularly mothers and aunts) not comprehending their feedback during parent-teacher interviews—exchanges often mediated by a child who speaks better English than their parent/guardian. This indicates that some schools are unaware of, or unsure how to access the interpreter support that is available for them. The successful parent-teacher communication at one IEC was primarily facilitated through bi-cultural Sudanese-background teacher aides who brought much needed language and cultural skills to the school. As one teacher reflected:

> *I think our involvement with parents is pretty good, but it's a lot of work. Our teachers' aides are constantly phoning and getting parents to come in. You have look at our parent-teacher nights. We get far more response than the high schools do … and that's with no English, and parents travelling by bus and train when they have no transport.*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

Apparently, the teacher aides would translate documents and notices to be sent home to parents/guardians in their own language. In some instances, the aides reportedly provided transport to school functions for parents/guardians. Significantly, the aides knew their communities well and provided immediate links to the local network of families in the school's area.

3.3 Supporting students in the classroom

Teachers considered the current population of African young people joining their classes dissimilar to previous cohorts of refugee students arriving from conflict-torn countries, particularly in terms of the high incidence of interrupted schooling, but also in terms of consistently very low literacy levels. IEC teachers, with many years of experience, often stated they are witnessing unprecedented numbers of students arriving in their classrooms with a complexity of issues including limited schooling experience, low literacy in their first language, and severe trauma.

3.3.1 Learning expectations

In terms of learning outcomes, teachers were finding it difficult to develop expectations for their new students from Africa. Ostensibly, teachers felt they lacked knowledge about the backgrounds (educational and cultural) of their students. Repeatedly, high school teachers said, 'I don't know how to teach these new kids coming from Africa who are in my class but can't read or write' and 'I know nothing about what schooling they did in Africa'.

IEC teachers felt similarly overwhelmed by the learning challenges. Some admitted they lowered their learning expectations for various African students, but were quick to acknowledge that lowered expectations could not exist forever, and finding a balance was difficult. This suggests that some IEC teachers are tailoring learning goals to students' competency levels. Once the learning process begins, however, IEC teachers found that many of their students acquired information and learned quickly. Some teachers observed their students making the equivalent of two years' progress within a term, although this was generally not the case.

One IEC teacher highlighted the importance of understanding student competencies and forming realistic learning expectations:

It's a question of education, not of intelligence, and that's why for some kids it's so very frustrating when they get to high school because teachers know they're smart, the kids know they're smart, but they just can't do it. So you really have to build them up rather than let them fail at anything … so to build them up sometimes you have to go lower in your expectations.

(IEC teacher)

By contrast high school teachers, perhaps because they are unaware of students' limited schooling backgrounds, seemed to expect their new African students to quickly catch-up with the competencies of their classmates. An approach articulated by one teacher,' … give the student time to settle down but set expectations for them to quickly catch-up with the others'. At times, this places unrealistic expectations upon new students.

ESL teachers felt their high schools' learning expectations of new African students were often unrealistic, as one put it, '... they expect us to bring all these kids up to scratch and ready for their classrooms'. They insisted that, while previous cohorts of refugee students could often be fast-tracked, the new Africans settling in their schools required more time. In general, these students had completed fewer years of schooling than other refugee young people from Asia, Europe and the Middle East (cf. DIMIA 2004). Given this reality, it was felt that present ESL teaching allocations were inadequate for high schools where substantive numbers of newly arrived African students have enrolled since 2004.

Significantly, ESL teachers were of the opinion that further efforts should be made to build the capacity of their schools to assist new arrivals by providing mainstream classroom teachers with professional learning about second language acquisition. They also suggested that schools create suitable bridging courses for post-compulsory aged students with limited years of schooling behind them. Alternatively, mainstream high school teachers (and their primary school counterparts) expressed a keen desire to further liaise with ESL teachers and school counsellors, who often dealt with students' extra-curricular support issues.

On a practical note, teachers described how their students often present to classrooms without the necessary stationery and textbooks, even simple tools such as a ruler, a pen and a pencil. This frustrated some teachers, who expected them to arrive prepared for the lesson. As one asked, 'How can I teach them when they arrive in the class with nothing … no pen and no paper?' Various high school and IEC teachers frequently spoke of practically supporting students by giving out pens and paper to them.

3.3.2 Flexibility

Various teachers considered 'flexibility' a prerequisite for classroom success with new African students. This included breaking the learning process down into manageable units. It also meant creating a classroom culture of 'it's okay to make mistakes' which helps strengthen the classroom as a 'safe place' for students to participate. A 'flexible' approach to learning was important, as emphasized by the following observation:

You read your class, and work out what their learning styles are, you respect those and build those into your lessons, and then they'll feel like they're getting somewhere. You look at them and you try and make them the expert.

(IEC teacher)

As the quote highlights, teachers need to attend to the individual learning styles of each student—although this is very hard in a high school setting. In general, teachers thought there was no overarching learning style which could be readily attributed to their African students. Instead, they needed to discover what worked and what did not with particular students.

A number of teachers highlighted the difficulties new African students experience concentrating in the classroom. In this context, an achievement might be simply keeping the student seated in the classroom. For this reason, teachers considered it necessary to have various back-up exercises which might provide a variety that assists concentration. It was felt concentration difficulties are often tied to the students' unfamiliarity with classroom learning contexts. (Added to this are factors such as hunger and tiredness which many teachers observed among their students.) One high school teacher explained:

You've got to be prepared to chop and change a bit, you've got to be prepared to do lots of different things … All of those are just little fillers, little breakers, and then it switches them back on and you're back into something else as well. So, have as many different strategies … in the classroom be prepared for as much change as you want, and cater for their needs all the time.

(high school teacher)

Flexibility was important as well because many students had limited organizational competencies. A key message from IEC teachers to high school teachers was not to assume that their new African students would have the same organizational capabilities of their class peers. Therefore, teachers need to make time to coach these students about the organizational aspects of being a successful student. Some teachers said their immediate priority was to help students acquire learning competencies which included organizational

skills and study habits. One high school teacher said, '…you're talking about systematizing stuff … and a lot of their time's spent on trying to find stuff in their folders and putting things in order'. Being organized was considered important to their successful classroom settlement. Evidently, disorganized students were likely to became interruptive and agitated with themselves and their teachers.

3.3.3 Group Work

Group work was raised by various teachers as an activity their students enjoyed. A high school teacher mentioned that her students seemed to engage with activities involving group work, but qualified that by saying: 'If some groups have got role models, it's good … and groups at similar levels ... otherwise it can make new students feel unable to contribute'. Again, the use of role models was reiterated as an important theme. An IEC teacher outlined the benefits of group work:

> *And once you get them into the group, the functions of the group, that someone's in charge, that everyone has responsibilities, they're talking, there's peer pressure to achieve but they're all contributing as well, and as long as you start dividing your class up like that and working your class like that, then it's going to avoid some problems.*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

A high school teacher stated, 'I think they do very well at group work. We had lots … last year with group work in class where they actually … talk amongst themselves and then they'll come up with the right answers'. In this sense, group work enabled students to spend more time engaging with a curricular activity and learning on their own terms in the context of a group.

But there can be limitations to group work. In a high school setting, working in a group can be a very different experience from an IEC or primary school. One IEC teacher anticipated a changed group work dynamic her students will experience at high school:

> *A lot of my students … I don't know how they'll cope with anything they do in groups at high school. And that will be really hard for them. I mean, they've identified that as something that they love, and when they get to high school it might be something that really intimidates them.*
>
> **(IEC teacher)**

3.3.4 Additional points for consideration

Below is a summary of four additional points for consideration shared by teachers during the consultations:

- Using positive role models was a common strategy that teachers used to support students in the classroom. As one IEC teacher put it, '… you praise this kid over here who's done all the right things and got everything out, so you've got a positive focus in the classroom for these to model for the rest of the kids'.

- Primary teachers mentioned that the use of a bi-lingual teacher's aide in the classroom was a crucial source of support in negotiating learning with new arrivals. Some primary teachers took it upon themselves to learn phrases in their students' first language, mentioning that this had the effect of connecting with and providing their students with an increased sense of safety.

- Teachers spoke of the need to creatively provide ways out of teacher-student clashes. For example, one IEC teacher described using a comfortable couch at the rear of the classroom, where an agitated student could go, sit and read comics to 'cool' down. Then after time, return to the class activity.

- Teachers felt that establishing networks whereby they can share experiences, strategies and ideas would greatly assist them supporting students. Teachers also said that case studies and specific strategies from beyond their local networks would help them in the classroom.

3.4 Educational pathways

Teachers described how their students and parents/guardians often had 'big and unrealistic education ambitions'. Teachers felt many students with 'perhaps only six or seven years of schooling behind them' and low English literacy levels are aiming too high academically. Focus groups with teachers confirmed the perception among most students that they must get their HSC to be successful in Australia. (see 2.3.1 Students' steps to the future). Consequently, many bright students aged over 18 years want to 'make up for lost time' by going from the IEC straight into Year 11 which, in most instances, is too difficult for them because they have insufficient English literacy skills. Another teacher reflected on parental expectations:

> *I think the expectations of the family are that: 'We've made it to Australia, we've made it to this safe country, you're our future.' The parents are thinking, 'You're at school now, you'll be fine. Then you'll go to university.' They're not*

seeing that they're [their children] coming to a new system, to a school system that they've never been in, and they don't see that they're falling way behind the normal progression. They think their kids can get here and cope, and go to high school, go to uni and get a great job …

(IEC teacher)

An indicative example is an 18 year old IEC student from Sudan whom teachers recognized had very good computer skills but very low English literacy levels. They suggested he enrol in a computer course at TAFE. But his parents would not consider it. In their view, school was the most important thing to finish. So, after completing his time at the IEC he went to high school to study Year 10. Because he was mature his IEC teachers considered he would be suited to that level. He started high school and was not happy there. Then the local Migrant Resource Centre caseworker enrolled him into a TAFE computing course which he found very difficult. But the idea that he had to finish high school remained important to the student and his parents, so he returned to Year 10. The high school staff told him, 'Well, when you finish school you're going to go back and start that same TAFE course again!' But, evidently, both he and his parents could only see TAFE as an inferior pathway compared with an HSC and University. As his teacher put it: 'He wanted to do computers, and could not see that he could fast-track and get into that TAFE course without Year 12'.

Various teachers suggested that students, especially those aged over twenty years, might be more successful at a TAFE College where they are better able to work 'at their own pace'. Simultaneously, they considered some students might be disadvantaged by the loss of structure and close supervision of study offered by high schools. Nevertheless, they suggested high schools provide students with more information about specific courses at TAFE and alternative pathways to their vocational goals. This would entail dealing with misconceptions about the HSC as the 'best' pathway to success.

4 PARENTS'/GUARDIANS' AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

This section draws upon a single two-hour consultation conducted with sixteen parents/guardians and community members at the Blacktown Migrant Resource Centre in November 2004. All were of Southern Sudanese background (see 1.3). Participants consisted of three single mothers and one aunt, eight fathers and various other community members. They were asked to offer their expectations and experiences in relation to their children's education. In response, they expressed great hopes for the opportunities available to their children in Australia. At the same time, they recognized the challenges their children faced 'making up for lost time' in schools. The following pages outline their perceptions.

4.1 Transitions to new schools

We started by asking parents/guardians about their children's transitions between schools (such as IEC or primary school to high school). Specifically we wanted to know what they considered the biggest challenges experienced by their children when they began high school. Responses were:

- 'language itself'
- 'English'
- '… they are losing their mother tongue'
- 'a new school environment'
- 'not understanding a big school'
- 'discrimination among the kids'
- 'African kids and Australian kids fighting'
- 'very different cultural backgrounds'
- 'fear of different colours'
- 'lots of homework'
- 'the work was too hard'
- 'school discipline is different and new'
- 'change of transport'
- 'the age problem',
- 'not ready for Year 10',
- 'too old for Year 10'
- 'no place to study at home'

The parents/guardians said their children found transitions between schools frustrating: work was intensified, there was a change in transport, and they did not know who to speak to at the new school. Some complained that their older sons and daughters were 'not allowed to attend high school' after graduating from an IEC.

The 'age problem' was of special concern to parents/guardians and played out in different ways. Some parents/guardians complained about older children being inappropriately placed in advanced year levels for which they were not academically prepared. Meanwhile, others said their older children were frustrated by the immature classroom behaviour of younger peers. In some instances, the transition from IEC to high school was too difficult for older children with interrupted schooling or no previous schooling. Moreover, parents/guardians felt unable to assist their children with homework because they had very basic English skills and no formal education.

The parents/guardians highlighted the need for explicit support during the three transitions from primary to high school, from IEC to high school, and from high school to further education. This support should include more focused orientation sessions, an explicit 'buddy system', peer support networks and homework group referrals.

4.2 Communication with schools

During the consultation, the theme of communication between parents/guardians and schools was hotly discussed. The parents/guardians said they were eager to know about their children's progress at school and to establish relationships with teachers. They want to play a role and were very concerned about their children's behaviour at school.

We initially asked them if they understood the notices and letters regularly sent home from school with their children. Overwhelmingly, they were frustrated by this communication method which relies upon students bringing notes home. In most cases they do not understand the notes, and often do not receive them at all because they are not passed on by their children. They asked if it was possible for notices to be individually posted in the mail. Evidently, the present system of communication does not adequately work for them.

Later we asked how parents/guardians would like schools to communicate with them. They favoured both the telephone and being sent a letter, but preferred to get information directly from people. For instance, they wanted to be telephoned to let them know a letter was on its way. The majority insisted letters should not be sent via the child 'who is in trouble'. Instead, they wanted the letter to be 'secret' between them and the school. Which meant being sent through the mail.

It seems that communications from schools are often thought of as indicators of 'trouble'. When parents/guardians are called to a meeting by the school their first response is: 'What is wrong?' We also asked parents/guardians who they would contact at school to ask about their child's progress. Most indicated they would not know who to contact. They said that when issues arise they like to go to school in person and ask the receptionist, but that this is difficult because of language barriers. Alternatively, they seek out someone who can telephone on their behalf. The single mothers and aunt described how many women are scared of initiating communication with school authorities.

These difficulties highlight the need for schools to designate staff to initiate liaisons with parents/guardians (especially in high school contexts). In primary schools parents/guardians considered the classroom teacher the most important contact in the school. However, in the high school setting, where the student has various teachers, they felt there was no recognizable teacher contact.

4.3 School discipline

The theme of school discipline was also discussed. Parents/guardians had mixed feelings about the transition from an authoritarian culture of school discipline toward the Australian system with its democratic ethos. They thought it created confusion between the way discipline is approached at home and at school. Parents/guardians felt there needed to be more discussion with schools about this and dialogue opened up. They also felt confused about the laws in Australia (especially regarding corporal punishment). Their feeling was that the African method of discipline for children was regarded as 'child abuse' by Australian laws.

They described how in Africa, discipline was often left up to the school with no parental involvement. In many cases, it seems no parental consent was required nor asked for. In this regard, recently arrived parents/guardians in Australia are orienting themselves to a new democratic ethos in which they have rights and obligations in their dealings with schools.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon the perceptions of students, teachers, parents/guardians and their communities, this section provides a series of interlinked recommendations to improve the educational outcomes of young African refugees in high schools. Underlining these proposals is the assertion that an integrated approach is required entailing various stakeholders working together. For this reason we have divided the recommendations into stakeholder sub-sections; schools, NSW DET, DIMIA, the NSW State Government and African communities. Finally, we recommend directions for further research.

5.1 Schools

1. That schools identify a number of significant staff to act as mentors and coordinate the transition of refugee students, and that the identity and role of these staff be made known to other schools and communities.

High school students said they were frustrated by having various subject teachers but apparently no appointed teachers to guide and support them through difficult transitional periods. Mentoring support is critical. There is a need for schools to identify teachers who have the respect of and rapport with African students and to support their mentoring roles. These teachers should be publicly acknowledged and linked with IECs and primary schools from which high school students will be sourced, and with African communities in the local area.

2. That high schools appoint a single staff member through whom parents/guardians of African background can make contact with the school.

Many parents/guardians are not communicating with high schools because they do not know how to approach them with an inquiry and with whom they should talk about their child's progress. Nor are schools clear about communication with parents/guardians. The research has shown that familiarity and knowledge about the good character of a school staff is very important for African parents/guardians. For this reason, schools should appoint a single staff person to liaise and build trust with the parents/guardians of African students and their communities.

3. That schools implement consistent classroom behaviour management strategies that provide time-out strategies for students in order to avoid confrontations.

Consistent behaviour management strategies across a school are very important. IECs and high schools need to share successful strategies. Underscoring this is the need to assist teachers to provide creative ways out of verbal classroom confrontations. Agitated students need to have safe, 'cool down' areas to which they may go, sit and take time out, before returning to class activities.

4. That schools consider implementing specific refugee students support programs to support refugee students adjust to school life.

Early intervention group counselling for refugee students, through the Settling In program, has proved effective in assisting refugee students to settle in Australia and their schools. The Linking New Arrivals to Community Support (LiNCS) program puts refugee students and their families in contact with available community support services. Hunger during school hours is a welfare issue for some students. Our participants described regular instances of their friends not eating breakfast, taking no lunch to school, and having no money for the canteen/tuckshop. Schools should consider implementing programs that provide breakfast at a subsidized cost for some students.

5. That schools use available resources to communicate with parents/ guardians and community members. This includes using community liaison officers, interpreter services and issuing translated documents.

Conventional written communication is not effective because most parents/guardians cannot read school notices written in English, and often they do not receive school letters because their children lose them or forget to pass them on. Use of the Telephone Interpreter Service provides bilingual support in contacting parents. Community liaison officers with relevant community language skills also greatly enhance communication. Where written communication is used, schools should use generic translated documents available to them.

6. That schools ensure teachers undertake professional learning about refugees, second language acquisition and students' prior education contexts.

Teachers said they did not know enough about the backgrounds of their African students and wanted specific information relating to their previous schooling, countries of origin and experiences of displacement. Added to this, mainstream teachers felt they had limited understanding of the dynamics of second language acquisition and how they could use the theory to assist them in developing the English language skills of their students.

7. That schools improve and extend strategies which assist the transition to high school, including mentoring and 'buddy' systems.

Schools need strategies involving extra-curricular activities which assist student integration into a new school. Students said they found a 'buddy' system helped them negotiate the structure of the school and develop a network of friends. While 'buddying' seems a common practice with many schools, some students said that their 'buddies' did not support them for a long enough period. However, while 'buddy systems' have been successful, there remain students who isolate themselves and become disconnected from their peers. They could benefit from targeted mentoring programs.

8. That schools provide opportunities for African students to safely tell their stories of displacement and resettlement to their teachers and peers.

The high school students who participated in this project said they wanted to share their stories with teachers and classmates. They sought a kind of post-arrival debriefing by sharing with others. Similarly, teachers indicated a desire to hear students' life stories. However, many felt their school provided no opportunities for this to happen. School Counsellors should facilitate such exchanges.

9. That schools provide specific activities that encourage African students to take part in student leadership.

Various students said they had previously undertaken leadership roles while in refugee camps in Kenya and wanted to participate in student representative bodies at their new schools. Other students said they wanted to see Africans participating in student leadership roles at their schools.

10. That schools create bridging courses specifically designed for post-compulsory aged young African refugees based on their needs.

Many students said they were not coping with the high school curriculum because they did not have the foundational years of prior education. This was particularly so for post-compulsory aged students who were placed in Year 10 after leaving the IEC. High schools need to recognize the specific needs of these students and create suitable bridging courses to ensure their continuing education.

11. That high schools and Intensive English Centres provide African students with counselling about alternative vocational pathways.

IECs and high schools need to identify students' vocational ambitions and provide advice regarding pathways to achieve them, including TAFE and non-academic pathways, which are appropriate for the individual student's circumstances, English language competence and previous educational experience.

12. That schools implement anti-racism strategies which utilize and build on available resources.

High school students said they regularly dealt with racism in their schools and provided numerous examples of verbal put-downs, bullying and fighting. Our research suggests this is an area of difficulty, especially as students make the transition from the IEC environment to the high school setting.

13. That schools invite representatives from African communities to address staff and meet with students.

A challenge for schools is to develop partnerships with African communities in their local area. Most students felt there were no connections between their school and their community and wanted this to change. It was felt that schools needed to learn more about Africa and their respective countries and that this could happen by inviting community representatives to schools. This would also indicate to African students and their parents/guardians the school's commitment to their wellbeing and their community's development.

14. That schools identify and utilize the appropriate African communities' leadership contacts in their area.

Most students belong to a local network of family groups, often centring around ethnic, clan and language affiliations, such as Dinka or Acholi. Schools need to identify these networks and their respective elders and make contact with them. They provide an excellent means for sharing information and dealing with issues as they arise. They also provide a pool of potential bi-cultural teachers' aides. Additionally, formal leaders of community organisations should be identified.

5.2 NSW Department of Education and Training (DET)

15. That DET provide professional learning opportunities and resources for schools which address the particular learning needs of African students.

Teachers said DET-provided professional learning was greatly valued, while schools indicted the need for teacher-release funds to ensure their staff could access training opportunities. DET needs to further develop the resources offered to schools and the delivery of professional learning.

16. That DET develop new and extend existing support networks of teachers working with African students.

Teachers want to know what others are doing with African students in their classroom and school contexts. This was particularly so for staff from regional schools (e.g. Coffs Harbour and Newcastle). They considered an Online forum would be an effective way to share experiences and strategies, but also wanted to meet with other teachers from time to time. DET should extend and resource the networks already established.

17. That DET extend programs which link students to service providers in their local area.

The STARTTS' LiNCS program has successfully linked IEC students and their families to service providers in their local area. In partnership with organisations like STARTTS, the model needs to be further developed and extended to high schools where there are significant numbers of recently arrived African students who are not accessing mainstream services.

18. That DET develop alternative programs based on the specific learning needs of African refugees.

IEC to high school, and Years 9 to 12 academic progressions are unrealistic for many African young people who have experienced severely interrupted schooling before arriving in Australia. DET needs to work with schools to develop alternative programs for young people with disrupted pre-arrival schooling. Alternative programs should target post-compulsory aged students entering Year 10 after leaving an IEC.

19. That DET provide information packages to African students and their families about viable alternative pathways towards employment and further education.

African students and their families require explicit information about alternative pathways in order to make informed choices.

20. That DET provide specific professional learning for mainstream classroom teachers to assist them in meeting the English language learning needs of African students.

High schools often expect ESL teachers to take responsibility for improving the competence of African students with limited English proficiency. This places unrealistic burdens upon ESL specialists. In addition to supporting ESL teachers, DET should provide professional learning about ESL and language teaching to mainstream teachers. This will more effectively build the capacity of schools to improve the educational outcomes of African young people.

21. That DET allocate additional ESL teachers/resources to schools with high numbers of newly enrolled African refugees.

Schools feel overwhelmed by the growing numbers of African refugees they are enrolling. ESL teachers and resources are inadequate to meet the identified need. Additional support is needed for schools with high numbers of recently arrived students.

22. That DET develop a program targeting overseas trained teachers from African countries which facilitates their retraining, the recognition of their qualifications, and their eventual deployment into the NSW education system.

Students, parents/guardians, community members and teachers desired to place teachers with African backgrounds in their schools. Community leaders indicated there were various members who were successful teachers and school administrators in Africa. DET should investigate ways to utilize their skills and expertise.

23. That DET provide training for selected African community members to act as teachers' aides.

Bi-lingual teachers' aides bring much needed language and cultural skills to a school. In addition to their provision of interpreting and translation services, and their assistance in classrooms, they provide immediate links to the local network of families in the area.

5.3 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA)

24. That DIMA provide more information to schools about the operation of the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) and how the strategy can support and assist students and their families integrate into Australian life.

Quite apart from delivering educational services, schools are providing important support for newly-arrived African refugee children and their families. Regular gaps in IHSS service delivery leave schools to take responsibility for the information provision for students and their families. School staff make referrals and link refugees to services, especially for Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) entrants with inadequate Proposer support. DIMA should provide schools with more information about IHSS-funded services.

25. That DIMA improve liaison between the IHSS service providers and schools where refugee young people enrol.

IHSS service providers need to liaise with local schools around needs assessment and case management decisions regarding students and their families. This is particularly so for IHSS service providers with Initial Information and Orientation Assistance (IIOA) and Early Health Assessment and Intervention (EHAI) responsibilities.

26. That DIMA's Central Referral Unit (CRU) provide DET with the earliest possible embarkation notification of scheduled school-aged refugee arrivals in NSW.

During 2004-5 schools were overburdened by large numbers of newly-arrived students enrolling of whom they had no prior knowledge or experience (e.g. Liberians and Burundis). The DIMA CRU should liaise more closely with DET concerning refugee settlement placements and timing so that adequate resources can be put in place.

27. That DIMA's Community Settlement Services Scheme (CSSS) support projects that improve the capacity of newly-emerging African communities to liaise with schools and to access the NSW education system.

Newly-emerging African communities would greatly benefit from CSSS project funding which builds their capacity to work with schools to promote educational opportunities and pathways within their communities. In the long term this will lead to economic development and positive settlement outcomes.

5.4 NSW State Government

28. That the NSW State Government allocate funds for building the capacities of selected African communities to liaise with schools.

The NSW State Government should fund projects which enable newly-emerging African communities to more effectively liaise with local schools. Community organizations have important roles to play in school/parent/guardian relationships. They also provide excellent

forums for disseminating information about schooling and further education to community members.

29. That the NSW State Government in partnership with African community groups initiate an African Youth Partnership.

Parents/guardians and community members highlighted the need for youth-oriented programs which are culturally sensitive and accessible. A whole of government approach is needed. For this reason a NSW State Government Youth Partnership targeting African young people (and working in partnership with schools) would provide an integrated approach toward better supporting young people and their families.

30. That the NSW State Government implement anti-racism strategies targeting law-enforcement professionals.

Students complained about racial stigmatization by police and CityRail transit patrols as an issue that needs to be addressed. While respective NSW State Government agencies have already done a lot of work in this area there remain difficulties.

5.5 African Communities (via their associations)

31. That African communities work with schools and mainstream youth service providers to establish and support homework/tutoring clubs for students.

Two after-school homework/tutoring clubs (in Parramatta and Blacktown) have provided much needed academic support to various African high school students in Western Sydney. They have also provided opportunities to link young people with various support services in their local area. Partnerships should be developed between African communities, schools and mainstream service providers to establish further homework/tutoring clubs.

32. That African communities recognize successful young role models in their respective fields.

Most of the young people said they valued role models and thought their communities should recognize young people for their achievements whether they be at school, in business, the arts or sport. Case studies of success are needed which show that achievement is possible. Communities should invite successful members to share their experiences with and advise young people who are beginning high school.

33. That African communities assist more parents/guardians to undertake further education.

The parents/guardians with whom we spoke said they wanted to encourage their children by studying themselves. They thought this would model to their children the importance of education and help them to assist with their homework. However, parents/guardians were frustrated because they felt unable to make informed choices about study after completing their 510 hours of Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP).

5.6 Further Research

34. That a major research project be conducted which investigates the pedagogy appropriate for the needs of African students.

There is a need for further research which can greatly inform the development of appropriate teaching resources for schools. In Australia, there have been limited research efforts but as yet no major project with the capacity to carry out in depth studies across a large population at various schools. Ideally, a project of this type would link schools in Victoria and NSW where the majority of African refugee families are settling.

35. That a project be undertaken that tracks the post-school progress of older students over a five year period.

There is a need to identify the barriers to successful transition to further education and employment for African young people, and to highlight successful transitions through case studies.

CONCLUSION

The young people in this study described combining new schooling with domestic and family responsibilities. Added to these were moral obligations toward extended family members remaining in Africa. Furthermore, the students were locating themselves within a new cultural space, while also trying to find security within the spaces of their own—albeit fractured—families and communities.

A sense of community and belonging in school is a crucial element for positive learning outcomes for refugee young people. Burnett and Peel (2001) suggest the 'most therapeutic event for a refugee child can be to become part of the local school community' (p.547). Probably the biggest challenge for our students was to seek out a community to which they could safely belong. This is why schools are such important places for them. Typically, their primary experiences of belonging in Australian society occurred at their schools. In this respect, schools are citizenship sites where new arrivals can experience attachment and belonging to a society at the level of everyday lived experiences.

We have found that young Africans are keen to learn and adapt to their new schools. A recurring motif throughout this report is the difficulty they experience transitioning from an IEC to high school. Nearly all the students we surveyed began school in Australia with low literacy levels in their first language and perhaps only three or four years of schooling completed in their country of birth or first place of asylum. This presented challenges to them and their teachers, which were multiplied when they began high school. To make the transition from an IEC easier, we have recommended high schools set about developing appropriate bridging courses for post-IEC students who are not yet ready for senior study, especially those aged over 18 years. Meanwhile, younger students entering at Year 7 or 8 are faring better than their older peers.

While primarily documenting the experiences of students, we have also explored teachers' perceptions. In general, we found that teachers wanted to know more about their new students from Africa. They considered themselves without a knowledge base from which to build their practice with new African students. By filling some of the knowledge gaps, we hope this report goes some way toward assisting teachers dealings with African young people, their families and communities. Further research is needed to explore specific teaching strategies in greater detail.

Conversely, we found that parents/guardians need more information about their children's new learning contexts. In various ways, they provide support and comfort when their children start school. Students' schooling experiences are enhanced by connections and partnerships between teachers and their families. In this respect, parental/guardian participation in school is very important.

There are limitations to this report in relation to the research sample. Schooling is compulsory for children up to 15 years of age in NSW. Half the students who participated in this project were post-compulsory aged. However, there are many African young people of post-compulsory age who are not attending school or undertaking formal education. We did not have access to them. Nevertheless, we regularly heard anecdotes from students about their friends and relatives who had 'dropped out' of high school because they found the transition from an IEC too difficult. Presumably, they are looking for work or undertaking family responsibilities.

An important project would be to track the progress of older students over a five year period, beginning with their entry to IEC and later transitions onto further education, employment, family duties or unemployment. No doubt, some would prematurely take leave of their formal education, perhaps permanently. It would be useful to discover why they chose to finish. In this respect, asking these young people about their choices would highlight the barriers and hindrances from the perspective of those now outside of the school system.

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APPENDIX:

Background to countries of origin and their education sectors

Most postcolonial African countries base their schools upon models imported by missionaries and former colonial rulers—primarily British and French in relation to the groups covered by this study. The system of education was generally teacher-centred and learning was by rote method. Newly independent African governments allotted large amounts of their national budgets to education, and foreign aid agencies infused funds into the development of schools.

What exists in many African countries to this day are a range of schools – private schools for the elite, some small community schools, and more generally under-resourced public institutions for the majority of students. Primary school enrolments outnumber secondary school enrolments in many countries between 50-60 per cent (average of data compiled from UNICEF statistics database, 2005, for Sudan, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Senegal, and Somalia) and tertiary institutions are accessible only to the very few. Given the uneven nature of opportunities for many students to attend school, the addition of war and conflict in places like Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Great Lakes region makes access to schools all but impossible. With primary refugee flows to Australia coming from these aforementioned countries, students' wide-ranging experiences of schools, particularly instances of interrupted schooling, come as no surprise. The following paragraphs will give a very brief overview of the conflict in the countries where the students in our study came from.

Sudan

Sudan is the largest country in Africa with a population of over 36 million. On 1 January 1956, Sudan became fully independent. Since independence, political turmoil and civil war have been permanent aspects in the lives of many Sudanese. Data published by the United States Committee for Refugees show that Sudan leads the world in numbers of internally displaced persons (U.S. Committee for Refugees 1999). Many have been displaced more than once, and repeatedly since 1989 (Abusharaf, 2002:52). Added to this are the large numbers who are forced to migrate permanently from Sudan.

The civil war has consumed the government's resources, leaving little money for basic services such as health care and education. By 2002, the adult literacy rate was just under 60 percent. The primary enrolment rate has declined from 53 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 2001, certainly due to the impacts of the war. Statistical figures for secondary school enrolments are only available until 1997, which was 21 percent of the school population. Tertiary enrolments were only 4 percent (all statistics from UNDP Human Development Report 2004). Illiteracy rates have been reported as falling since 1980, but are still divided

along gender lines with 29 percent of males illiterate compared to 50 percent illiteracy for females (UNDP 2004).

In terms of language groups, Sudan is a heterogeneous country which is typically classified by observers into binary social categories along geographic (north versus south), ethnic (Arabs versus Africans), and religious lines (Muslims versus Christians). As Abusharaf (2002:5) describes, an array of ethno-linguistic and religious groups inhabit Sudan's vast territory, including: the Hadandwa, Mahas, Nuer, Danagla, Dinka, Shiluk, Nuba, Rubatab, Rikabia, Shayqia, Murle, Kababish, Manasir, Azande, Jaleen, Bori, Shuli, Anwak, Latuka, and Beja.

Peace in Sudan is very fragile as demonstrated by responses to the death on 30 July 2005 of the country's senior vice president John Garang (a Dinka from Southern Sudan). His death provoked riots in Khartoum and Juba. As a former leader of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), Garang was a key player in forming a peace deal that would give the Southern Sudanese more stake in the Northern dominated Sudanese government. The peace deal represents another step in attempting to end Sudan's 21-year civil war. There have been fears that Garang's death will yet again destabilize the peace process (BBC News, 1 August 2005). Garang's long-time colleague and co-founder of the SPLA, Salva Kiir Mayardit, has since been appointed as senior vice president.

Sierra Leone and Liberia

In the 1990s, two major conflicts in West Africa – Sierra Leone and Liberia – caused nearly one million refugees to flee to neighboring countries, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. Smaller conflicts in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau in 1998 also produced some 200,000 refugees (UNHCR, 1999:260). When Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees initially fled to Guinea and Cote-d'Ivoire, local people accommodated many in their homes; however, capacity was soon exhausted and refugees had to flee to camps. As of 1999, Guinea was still hosting over 500,000 refugees, and Cote d'Ivoire was hosting around 138,000 (UNHCR, 1999:260). Results of the conflicts had many complex dimensions including ethnic tensions, struggles for resources, and uprisings of disaffected youths. Despite agreement to end hostilities in 1999, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees confirms that ceasefire violations, continued human rights abuses, and limited demobilisation of soldiers continues to haunt these traumatised societyies

Burundi, Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo (Great Lakes Region)

The Great Lakes region (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda) has been marred by years of civil war and violence, resulting in a high level of poverty, although Kenya and Tanzania have been exempt from conflicts instead becoming 'safe havens' to establish refugee camps. Refugees from Burundi, Rwanda, and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are also arriving in Australia in increasing numbers. This has been the result of ongoing civil wars in the DRC, the aftermath of the 1994 genocide which occurred in Rwanda, instigating mass killings in neighboring Burundi, and unresolved tensions in the region as a result of various political factions and interest groups vying for control of the country and its rich natural resources (UNHCR, 1999:272). The number of displaced people in the Great Lakes region has been estimated at over one million, and response from the international community outside of non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies has been generally noncommittal.

Education sectors

Poverty, war, and civil unrest have adversely affected the education systems of these countries. Not only are the physical structures of schools damaged and destroyed, but various governments' and rebel factions' expenditures on war have left minimal funds for investment in education and health. For example, in Burundi after three years of not receiving a salary, the country's primary and secondary teachers went on strike for over a month, and university lecturers announced they would remain on strike indefinitely (IRIN News, 2005).

In Sudan, the United Nations Integrated Regional Information (IRIN) service reports on the lack of trained teachers. Only 7 percent of teachers in Southern Sudan have completed more than one year of training, thus hindering efforts for the country to achieve universal primary education. IRIN also reports that of 1,600 schools in Southern Sudan, only 200 are housed in permanent structures. Gender inequities are glaring. According to the Sudan Basic Education Programme (SBEP), only 2,500 children, out of a southern population of 7.5 million, have completed primary school, and only 500 of those children are girls. Similarly, the international aid agency CARE estimates that of the 6,000-8,000 primary teachers in Southern Sudan, only 6 percent are female (IRIN News, 2005). Finally, as in Burundi, teachers do not receive regular salaries from the government, and therefore, are dependent on international aid agencies, churches, and parents.

Many displaced people remaining in refugee camps are attempting to undertake some form of education. In 2004, the UNHCR published educational indicators covering 118 refugee camps in 23 asylum countries that summarized participation and completion rates of students between the ages of 5-17. There are over 88,000 people living in Kakuma, one of three large refugee camps in northern Kenya (UNHCR, 2004). In Kakuma, where many young people in this study lived for a time, it was reported that 72 percent of females and 100 percent of males enroled in school, and almost all of those students successfully completed a full school year (UNHCR, 2004:9). However, Kakuma has few qualified or trained teachers in its schools, and the student to teacher ratio is 64:1 (UNHCR, 2004:9). Encouraging female

participation and retention in schools, as well as providing facilities for training teachers are some of the challenges of education in refugee camps.

Education in refugee camps is provided by non-government organizations (NGOs). For example, the Lutheran World Service (LWS) in Kakuma operate 21 primary schools and three secondary schools. The LWS also runs six pre-schools in the camp. LWS (2005) reports a student population of 22,000, with only 2,000 attending secondary school. Curriculum in Kakuma schools is reportedly taught in English and Kiswahili, and focuses on literacy and numeracy. The camp has a school system similar to the Kenyan school system. Despite providing access to education for refugees, health, education, and social services are in short supply, and security, especially for women and girls, is a major issue.