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Image: Ali Mostolizadeh

## Introduction

For resettled refugees, access to tertiary education promotes a sense of belonging (Wilkinson, 2018), enables social and economic integration and equality (Dryden-Peterson & Giles, 2010; Hynie, 2018; Lenette, 2016; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021), and equips people to contribute to the rebuilding of communities post-conflict (UNESCO, 2017). ‘Settlement countries’ also benefit socioeconomically when citizens from refugee backgrounds can access tertiary education (Lenette, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Graduates from refugee backgrounds often use their expertise to support their own communities, and/or to contribute to resettlement contexts as community leaders (Baker, Ramsay, Irwin, & Miles, 2018; UNHCR, 2016).

In New Zealand (NZ), refugee resettlement is currently guided by the Refugee Resettlement Strategy (Immigration New Zealand, 2012, hereafter, ‘the Strategy’). This identifies five priority outcome areas: health, education, housing, participation, and self-sufficiency. However, refugee-background students are not named as ‘priority learners’ in education policy, and access to targeted supports, including specialist English language teaching, varies by geographical location and educational institution. Targeted support provision depends on the initiative of regional Ministry of Education staff and institutional leaders (Anderson, Ortiz-Ayala, & Mostolizadeh, In press; Sutton, Kearney, & Ashton, 2021). Funding for specialist language teaching is limited (Rafferty, 2020), and wider inequities inherent in education provision impact on refugee-background students. Refugee-background secondary school students with less than five years in NZ schools experience poor educational outcomes (Rafferty, 2020; Rafferty et al., 2020), severely limiting their post-school options.

## Aims

This participatory action research project involved working with refugee-background students to identify and enact practices that promoted their capacity to navigate and negotiate the secondary-tertiary education border. The project explored four questions:

1. How do refugee-background students imagine and experience secondary-tertiary education transition?
2. What strategies do they employ to navigate this transition successfully?
3. What institutional practices foster students’ ‘navigational capability’ in secondary and tertiary education?
4. How might students’ navigational experiences inform resettlement, and teaching and support practices in secondary and tertiary education institutions?

Participants included 44 young people aged 16–21 years; 29 from Dunedin (24 female and five male), and 15 from Invercargill (nine female, and six male). Most joined the project while in senior secondary school, except for two, who joined while engaged in university access programmes, and two, who were neither studying nor working. By the end of 2022, 20 of our participants were in tertiary study. Dunedin participants were from Syria, Afghanistan and Palestine, and spoke Arabic or Dari/Farsi, while Invercargill-based participants were Colombian and spoke Spanish. The project revolved around regular workshops organised with our participants. Data were collected through interviews, participant observation, and artefacts created by and with our participants, including a full-length documentary film.

## What we learnt

Young people had high expectations of education as a pathway to a better life for themselves and their families. Young people represented education as a path to social mobility, in more or less linear terms. However, many had non-linear experiences, and some encountered major structural barriers that made access to education difficult or impossible. Young people worked actively to navigate education despite barriers, through: (1) “resistance” or contesting barriers; (2) “underground” (emotional and

psychological) work; and (3) relationships with others (Anderson et al., 2023). Young people’s access to education was profoundly shaped by familial, geographical, institutional and social factors. However, our participants identified teachers and school staff as critical enablers in relation to educational access and success. Teachers who enabled young people’s access to education were inclusive, respectful and affirming. They supported young people’s learning, communicative competence, and development of peer relationships and took seriously young people’s capability as learners. Young people resisted homogenising assumptions about former refugees (e.g. as solely language learners or incapable of academic study), and highlighted the importance of teachers taking student safety seriously. Young people linked a sense of inclusion in school with a sense of belonging in NZ more broadly.

## Recommendations for practice

### Government:

1. Recognise refugee-background young people as ‘priority learners’ at all levels of education. Our study showed that, currently, educational access is left too much to chance for refugee-background young people; we saw widely varying practices across institutions and cities.
2. Ensure that refugee resettlement policy prioritises participation and belonging rather than a short-term focus on getting people into paid employment. Some students in our study had great difficulty accessing education, but were encouraged to look for (low wage) employment, regardless of their aspirations.
3. Enact the Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities and Tertiary Education Strategy’s commitment to keeping ‘learners at the centre’ and ensuring ‘barrier free access’ through accessible admissions processes and study pathway options regardless of geographical location and educational background. Many young people in our study required support and advocacy to access basic educational entitlements. We need a system that enables access, allowing for flexibility, non-linearity, and growth over time.

### Kaiko, resettlement support staff, and educational institutions:

1. Know that your work matters – a lot. Effective teachers facilitate young people’s access to peer networks and practical information, as well as curriculum/subject knowledge and learning-related skills. Our study showed that teachers and school leaders are important role models, and brokers of belonging.
2. Help refugee-background young people understand and navigate education pathways. Recognise refugee-background young people as more than (English) language learners and recognise teachers’ role in supporting young people’s access to pathways information, mentoring, and rich, career-enabling experiences. Our participants described the work of such teachers as transformative and life-changing.

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