

Session 1 BACKGROUND READINGS

The Refugee Experience

NURTURING RESILIENCE IN REFUGEE STUDENTS

Section a

Refugee students are resilient. They survive war, and they then face the challenge of surviving “peace” – a new life in a new country.

Most refugees, including children, survive horrors which most of us can not begin to imagine. Not only do they survive, they overcome huge obstacles, protect their families, maintain their culture, and build new lives for themselves. Refugees are strong and resourceful, but resilience needs nurturing.

Before they arrive in resettlement countries like Australia, the majority of refugee students will already have experienced persecution or armed conflict in their home countries; a dangerous journey of escape; and life in a refugee camp or country of first asylum. The refugee experience can be extremely traumatising for them .

Resilience is the concept that people have the internal ability to live through trauma and terrible experience, and to heal, to “get over it” and to rebuild their lives.

This is seen clearly in the lives of many refugees, who survive horrors that most for us can not even imagine, and carry on to rebuild happy and successful lives.

The ease in which they can achieve this depends on many factors, including how they managed their lives before the trauma, what level of family and community support they have and the environment in which they live. For many years it was thought that children were so resilient that they did not need to formally process traumatic experience. Now we know that this is not the case.

Children and young people are incredibly resilient, but that resilience has to be nurtured and supported. Refugee students who are traumatised are usually living with parents who are traumatised. The normal support structures for children who are hurt is not there. At times the children have to assume the role of carer of the parents. Teachers and school counsellors are often their first and most important contact with their new society. Education is the students’ doorway to a new future. It is critical that as we work with refugee students we continually strive to acknowledge and build their resilience and to recognise that at times it can be very weak and need specialist support.

Half of all refugees who apply for resettlement in countries like Australia are children and young people. Refugee children and young people are among the most vulnerable people in the world. By the time they arrive in Australia, most of them will have lived through many traumatic experiences. These include leaving behind everything they know - their home, village, or community; their extended families, school, friends, and familiar culture. They may have been separated from family; made long and dangerous journeys; and lived in terrible conditions in refugee camps. These are common pre-arrival experiences for refugee children and young people.

Resettlement is often a traumatic experience for refugee students. They face a variety of problems, including learning a new language, racism, the impacts of torture and trauma and trouble adapting to changes in traditional family structure, roles and culture. The adults they are dependent on are themselves traumatized and may be unable to meet the developmental needs of their children. These combined setbacks to their cognitive, emotional, social and physical development can make refugee children particularly vulnerable to mental health problems.

Until quite recently it was believed that children did not fully experience the negative impact of torture and trauma. It is now recognised that children as young as three experience problems in their psychosocial development if they are not given some extra assistance and support. Children are resilient - *if* they are given early assistance and support to recover from childhood trauma and *if* they have a safe and nurturing environment in which they can continue to develop. Appropriate, holistic, early intervention is essential to the prevention of later mental health problems.

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES AND VULNERABILITIES

Section b

Children and young people who live in war-torn places, or who suffer from persecution, experience atrocities that most adults will never have to endure. They are frequently caught in the middle of conflicts that are deliberately targeted at civilians. Children may see their parents or members of their family tortured, taken away or killed. They may themselves be injured in the fighting. It is not uncommon for children to be separated from their families or parents. They are extremely vulnerable to exploitation, particularly girls, who are targeted for rape and forced prostitution.

In addition to the effects of being caught in armed conflict, children experience many destructive indirect consequences of the fighting. Wartime is a time of great social instability and chaos. Children experience poverty, malnutrition and violence as their families disintegrate, their parents' livelihoods are destroyed and community networks are broken. Often they are unable to attend school or seek

medical attention if they are sick or injured. Their normal childhood activities have to be put on hold.

ALEXANDRIA'S STORY

This very moving story by a young Bosnian Christian girl tells of the death of her best friend who was Muslim in the fighting in Sarajevo.

When I was asked to write a story about my life, I could have written about absolutely anything since I was born in Bosnia and have lived there during the war. I would like to tell you how my family escaped from Sarajevo and came to Australia but since it is my best friend's birthday in seven day's time I will tell you about her.

Well to start from the beginning, my best friend was Renata and I have known her ever since I could remember or ever since I was able to know for my self. She lived just across from me so we were always together. Renata was Muslim and I am Orthodox but this didn't matter we were still friends. My sister used to tell us that we were joined at the hip. We went to pre-school together and we used to always pick fights with boys and then see which one had more bruises and scars.

Well the reason that I am writing this is the scar on my leg reminds me of the war every time I look at it.

Renata and I started primary school and at that time the war had begun but we were too young to understand what was going on and thought that this was only another day off school. In the beginning every one didn't actually believe that there was going to be a war but in less than a week the city of Sarajevo was filled with army stations and barricades.

At that time many people left but the majority stayed thinking that this was only temporary. Within one month the power was cut and we had to walk about 13 km to get our water. Everyone had to help with this because the more people who went, the more water we could carry.

As the war was happening Renata and I used to play in my flat and her family would often stay at my house since we had a storeroom, which was dug in the hill. That was the time when I realized that the war wasn't going to go away since there were more and more people coming into the city from surrounding villages. As kids we had our parents telling us all the things that we should do but we always used to sneak out and go to our day care centre or our school, which had been turned into army centres. We had our little petty fights but we always managed to get over them. But this was not to last.

As the peace treaty was signed with the UN and the Bosnian government, people were moving around more and we were allowed to play outside our flats during the day.

While we were playing a game with all the other kids who lived in surrounding buildings, one of the adults started yelling and all of a sudden the troops that were behind our flats started shooting. Everyone jumped back and Renata and I hid under a car that was parked not far away from us. Then there was quiet and no one moved. It

was as if the time stopped for a split second. When I looked up I saw my cousin and Renata's mum yelling at us to get out from underneath the car. We climbed out quickly and started running towards the flats. To us this was funny and we were laughing.

When we reached my flats the booming started heavily and the shooting was so loud we had to cover our ears. As we were running in to the flats a grenade fell close to us. My cousin pulled me up off the ground and as he was doing this I heard a loud scream, which I was able to hear with my ears closed. As I turned around I felt a strong sharp pain in my leg and fell on the ground. Tarik, my cousin went to cover my eyes but I saw what I didn't want to believe. Renata was lying on the ground in a pool of blood, unconscious. Next to her were her mother and my parents. My cousin picked me up and then I realized that I had blood all over my leg and I couldn't feel it.

After that, it took me a while to realize what just happened, the fact that I had lost my best friend.

I was taken to the hospital because on the impact of the explosion a piece of metal got stuck in my leg and it needed to be taken out. When we reached the hospital I was in a lot of pain and I was feeling faint. But most of all I was scared of the hospital, because it is different when you hear about a war hospital and when you are actually in one. There was a lot of blood and injured people around but what struck me was that there were dead people there that died before the doctors could get to them and body parts everywhere.

At that time I passed out. When I woke up I was at home and the piece of the metal was still there. One of my dad's friends was a vet before the war and he took it out with my sister's biology set. The next day I saw Renata's mother and my mother talking and I came up to her and asked where was Renata. I was expecting her to tell me that she died but to my surprise she answered me with a smile on her face. Renata was still alive and in the hospital. That afternoon my mother took me to visit her and I was so happy to see her. I spent the whole day talking to her about the things that we did before and what we were planning to do for my birthday, which was coming up.

The next day my mother came to my bedroom and sat on my bed. She told me that last night Renata died from internal bleeding and that we were going to go to her funeral in a week. I was upset but satisfied that I at least said goodbye in a kind of way to her. I didn't get to go to her funeral because the shooting was really bad.

When I was leaving Sarajevo, Renata's mother gave me her bracelet that Renata wore all the time. Now all I have to remember one of my best friends is a bracelet and a scar on my leg.

This story originally appeared in the publication "Stories from a Troubled Homeland" written by students at Randwick Girls' High School, Sydney.

DURING ESCAPE AND SEEKING ASYLUM

Section d

Most refugees today have fled from war or armed conflict in their home countries. Often this is internal conflict between government forces and guerrilla or separatist groups who are fighting for the independence of a certain group or region. Due to the nature of this warfare, civilians, including children, are frequently caught in battles and targeted in the fighting. Many children actually take part in armed conflict as child soldiers.

Sometimes governments have sustained campaigns of persecution against some of their citizens, because they belong to a particular religion or ethnic or racial minority or because of their perceived support of guerrilla groups. The most extreme form of persecution is ethnic cleansing and genocide, but persecution also includes systematic rape, torture, denial of work and education, and the displacement of people from their homes and land. This persecution is targeted directly at civilians, often women and children.

Flight from persecution often involves difficult and dangerous ordeals along the way. Many refugees are forced to flee at night in the midst of conflict and confusion. There may be no time to collect travel documents. For some people it is too dangerous to travel on genuine passports or identity papers.

Sometimes families will have time to sell their homes and possessions to raise money to pay for a people smuggler to carry them safely across the border or to organise a boat trip to safety. Other people do not have prior warning of the danger they face. Bombs destroy their homes or armed people invade their villages, towns or cities, and they have to flee for their lives. The fortunate ones carry some of their most precious possessions. Others escape with just the clothes they wear. Sometimes they have to walk long distances or travel through hostile territory with little to eat and drink. They can face many dangers before they reach safety. Some refugees do not reach safety.

During flight, some refugees are stopped by the authorities of other countries, either on land or sea. Some are turned back or forced to go elsewhere. Many of them bear the scars of ill treatment or torture as they make the journey into exile. Refugees, both adults and children, miss their homeland. They miss their homes and their neighbourhoods, their schools, their family and friends. They miss all the things that we take for granted. Refugee children see things and survive experiences that many adults in the world never have to endure.

When refugees first flee their country they settle wherever they can find shelter. Some find shelter in border areas outside refugee camps. They set up shantytowns, or live beside railway tracks, on riverbanks or in the poorer districts

of cities, towns and villages. The local people often mistrust them and the conditions under which they live can be harsh and unsafe. From there they move to refugee camps or try to move to third countries like Australia where they hope to find safety.

The majority of the world's refugees live in camps in developing countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tanzania and Kenya, as well as other parts of Asia, Europe and Africa. The largest urban refugee populations are in the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Other refugees were dispersed in rural areas.

In escaping from dangerous situations, some refugees have no option but to use people smugglers. People who use people smugglers are usually genuine refugees who are turning to a last resort to save their own lives or those of their family. The journeys that smugglers organise are extremely risky and dangerous in themselves. Boats are often un-seaworthy, horribly crowded, and lack basic provisions and facilities such as food, water, and medical care.

DUNIA'S STORY

This is the story of a young girl from a well off Orthodox Christian background from Bagdad. She tells how she had to flee her home and live with Kurds in the mountains under hash conditions before being allowed to come to Australia to live with her cousin.

I didn't want to come to school today because the memories of things that happened are so painful but the people at home encouraged me and said this story should be told. So that people would know. I hope you will think sometimes of the people still in troubled countries. I cry every day for my family who are still there. I was about 12 when it happened. I was living in Shekan. My family and I had been thrown out of our home in Bagdad and we were forced to live in a house without glass in the windows (we put plastic bags over them) and the floor was sand. There was no electricity or water. It wasn't what we had been used to in Bagdad. Our house there was big, modern and comfortable.

In my house three or four families of my relatives were living. We ate food from the small plot of land my father farmed. My parents still live there now with some of my brothers and sisters. I don't know why Sadam Hussein hates the Kurdish people, who are Muslims like him. My family are Orthodox Christians and he doesn't like us either. The Kurdish people were very good to us and other Orthodox Christians were living with them too.

About a year after we went there a terrible thing happened. My Mother and I were cooking bread in the garden on a thing similar to a BBQ. I saw a bomb

shoot past and land about a kilometre away. My Father ran up to the top of the house to see what happened. Everyone was very worried.

My Father told us to leave immediately. We couldn't take anything with us. We all ran into the mountains and spent about a week without food. There were lots of people there with us. We could not find our relatives or friends. I was very scared, hungry and tired from walking. I didn't understand why Saddam Hussein was bombing us but later I found out that he was trying to kill all the Kurds because they wanted independence and their own country to live in.

After about a week, helicopters from the United Nations dropped food, clothing and tents for us. I saw lots of dead bodies but no one could bury them because they were too scared of the army. When the bombing stopped we returned to our village. We lived there for another year. The school in the village had been bombed and so we couldn't continue our education. There were no books or equipment and of course there were no buildings. So my father decided that we had to leave this place so that I could return to school.

We faced many difficulties and sometimes had to pretend to be people we weren't. But eventually we made our way to Jordan and from there my father was able to contact my cousin in Australia. After many months of letters and phone calls, the Australian government allowed me to come to Australia to live with my cousin.

I miss my family but I am grateful to them and to my cousin that I am able to be here, to live peacefully and to study.

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LIFE IN REFUGEE CAMPS

Section e

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also includes systematic rape, torture, denial of work and education, and the displacement of people from their homes and land. This persecution is targeted directly at civilians, often women and children.

Most refugees initially escape across borders into neighbouring countries. Many of them stop there because it is too dangerous or difficult to travel on to another country. They are often not very welcome, although usually tolerated, in these poor developing countries. They are rounded up and sent to huge institution-like refugee camps in remote areas, to be placed under the 'protection' of UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Life in the camps is often a struggle for survival. They are crowded and lack basic facilities. Often families do not have proper shelter. They rely on UNHCR and NGOs (non-government organisations) for food rations, because they are not allowed to leave the camps to work. Food, water and firewood for cooking are all scarce.

Refugee camps are also very dangerous places. Children in particular are at very high risk of armed attacks, rape, domestic violence, and abduction for sexual exploitation or recruitment as child soldiers.

Normal family routines are not possible in refugee camps. Men and boys suffer greatly from boredom and depression because they are unable to provide for their families. Sometimes this leads to increased domestic violence against women and children. Children are often not able to attend school, particularly girls who may have to stay home to look after younger siblings.

KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP - NORTHERN KENYA

The Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya houses refugees who have fled from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. The majority of the refugees in Kakuma are from southern Sudan. They flee over the mountains and cross the border into northern Kenya to escape indiscriminate bombing by the Sudanese government.

All new arrivals have to register at the Lokichoggio Reception Centre, close to the Sudanese border before being taken to Kakuma Refugee Camp. The Reception Centre consists of half a dozen tin roofed concrete buildings, open on three sides. There is no adequate protection from the heat or the swirling red dust. A high cyclone wire fence topped with razor wire encloses the compound. No food is available, only water and firewood and some limited medical assistance.

Once the refugees are processed they are driven 120 kilometres in cattle trucks to Kakuma Refugee Camp. As well as Sudanese refugees, it also houses refugees from Somalia and Ethiopia. There are approximately 95,000 people in the camp. Many have been there for ten years.

Travel on this road is dangerous and is only undertaken by UNHCR staff as part of a daily convoy or with security guards, carrying rifles. There are regular attacks on travellers by bandits. The road south of Kakuma is particularly dangerous and in very poor condition. Temperatures during the day can reach 40 degrees and only drop to the low 30s at night.

The camp is situated on the lands traditionally inhabited by the Tukarna tribe who are nomadic people, depending on goat and donkey herding for their livelihood. The presence of large numbers of refugees has led to conflict with the Tukarnas.

There are also conflicts between different ethnic and tribal groups of refugees within the camp. Most of the Tukarnas and a number of the refugee men own AK47 rifles. There is a very high incidence of rape and sexual abuse of women and girls by refugee men and there are regular reports of rape and sexual mutilation of refugee women and girls by gangs of Tukarna men. Although for most of these women resettlement in another country is the only durable solution, very few achieve this.

Those who are in particular danger in the camp are imprisoned in an enclosure known as the Protection Area. They are confined in rotting canvas tents in an area approximately the size of a football field behind high barbed wire fencing. Some 120 families live in this area. Many have lived here for up to five years.

Food and water are in short supply in Kakuma and many in the camp face nutrition problems. Because the camp is designated a danger area by UNHCR, the families of UNHCR staff and staff from non-government organisations (NGOs) working in Kakuma are not allowed to live in or near the camp. Travel to the capital Nairobi 840 km away is difficult and dangerous.

Camp inhabitants rely heavily on international assistance for their survival. This is because there are limited opportunities available for self-sufficiency due to the semi-arid environment. There are also lack of employment opportunities and lack of access to markets for the sale of goods.

The conflict in the Sudan has been going on for 25 years. Some refugees have lived in camps for 15 years with no hope of return. Resettlement is their only hope for a decent future for themselves and their children.

COUNTRY BACKGROUNDS

It is useful to know something about the countries from which refugees have come. Information about recent refugee populations who have resettled to Australia, and some information about their countries can be found at:

AMEP Professional Connections website

<http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/factsheets.html>

Country profiles cover Burma, China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iraq, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone.

Department of Immigration and Citizenship website

<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-planning/community-profiles.htm>

Community profiles cover the Bhutanese, Burmese, Congolese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, Liberian, Sierra Leonean, Sudanese, Togolese and Uzbek communities.