Offering the best conditions for educational success

1. Schools, pre-schools and childcare facilities as settings for supporting the integration of refugee children and young people

A number of resettlement countries have focussed on school and childcare settings for delivering integration support to refugee children and their families. There are a number of advantages in this approach:

- support is delivered as a collaboration between these settings and refugee families and communities and mental health and integration support services;
- the pre-school and school environments are a primary source of contact between refugee families and the receiving society;
- settings-based interventions allow for schools and childcare facilities to explore ways in which they can create a supportive environment for refugee families;
- refugee families may be reluctant to access one-to-one professional support. Providing support through schools and childcare facilities offers families the opportunity to form relationships with supportive professionals in a non-stigmatising and non-threatening way.

Established integration programs have implemented a number of strategies to promote integration of refugee families through school, pre-school and childcare settings, including:

- orientation programs for children and parents;
- target language programs for children and youth;
- befriending or mentoring programs for children and youth and/or their parents and guardians;
- professional development programs for relevant staff;
- developing systems and resources to enhance access by refugee families (e.g. translated materials, providing interpreters);
- staff development initiatives (e.g. recruiting bilingual teaching and childcare staff, bilingual aides, diversity and inclusion experts);
- curriculum resources designed for both refugee youth and the wider student community;
- awareness raising activities aimed at valuing and affirming diversity and countering racism;
- specific cultural programs (e.g. arts projects, community theatre). These can provide an important vehicle for refugee youth to express themselves and for sharing their skills and perspectives with the wider community;
- encouraging refugee children and youth’s involvement in recreational and sporting activities;
- homework clubs.

2. Challenges in adjustment to education

Refugee children and youth are likely to have experienced some degree of disruption in their education. In addition, resettlement will involve the challenge of a new and unfamiliar school system for refugee children, youth and their families. The culture and structure of the education system may be very different from that of their country of origin and country of asylum (e.g., in some resettlement countries, teaching styles are less formal).

Adjustment to school may be particularly taxing for children and youth who have had no or limited or interrupted prior school experience. Therefore, most refugee children and youth will require a period of intensive and targeted support to assist them in adjusting to a new school system, to learn the language of the receiving society and, in some circumstances, to redress
the effects of disrupted education. In some resettlement countries, additional funding and special grants are given to schools with a large enrolment of refugee children and youth to provide culturally sensitive and responsive education upon arrival. The availability of specialist educational support for refugee children and youth will be an important consideration in placement decisions.

In the case that such support is not available, especially in schools in newly designated resettlement areas, systems should be put in place to ensure that this support is provided. Childcare and school facilities, as well as language learning centres can be supported to adopt strategies to respond sensitively to affected children and youth, strengthen family support and offer an environment which offers the very best prospects for integration. Establishment of peer support networks for refugee youth can also contribute to better mental health outcomes.

Depending on their age, refugee children and youth may face multiple transitions in the early integration period (for example, upper primary aged children will face the transition to secondary level schooling while trying to learn a new language).

3. Approaches to support children and youth in education

A range of approaches have been developed to delivering intensive support to refugee children and youth in the early integration period, including:

- providing them with a period of language training and orientation;
- ‘pull-out’ arrangements, enabling children and youth to divide their time between schooling and intensive language and orientation classes prior to full-time entry into general education;
- providing additional technical support to schoolteachers to enable them to provide culturally sensitive and responsive education;
- providing additional support to children and youth in the general classroom environment through the use of bilingual staff and bilingual instruction;
- designing and providing language courses for out-of-school youth under the age of 25 years or over the age of compulsory schooling. Targeted language classes can be particularly effective in supporting youth to learn the resettlement country language and transition to further education and employment.

These approaches are not mutually exclusive and are used in a complementary fashion in many resettlement countries.

4. Should refugee children and young people be offered separate classes in the early integration period?

Some countries place emphasis on children and young people’s entry into the general education system from the outset. This is supported through capacity building strategies such as deploying bilingual teaching professionals, culturally inclusive curricula and bilingual instruction. In others, separate programs are provided to refugee children to prepare them for entry into the wider school system. In practice, the differences are a matter of emphasis, with many countries having a dual strategy involving both specialist programs and broader capacity building initiatives. This reflects an understanding that those children participating in specialist programs will ultimately enter the general school system. There are a number of factors to consider when planning approaches to supporting refugee children in their integration into the school system:

- If a capacity building approach is adopted as sole strategy, it is important that adequate resources are invested in this task. If done well, this is not necessarily a more cost-effective approach.
- Specialist programs may be necessary where children and young people are enrolling in schools with very small numbers of resettled refugee students, since
comprehensive capacity building approaches may not be economically viable in these environments.

- A capacity building approach reflects the ‘two-way’ street notion of integration, enabling both refugee children and the wider school system to learn from and adjust to each other.
- By separating them from their peers, specialist programs may compound perceptions held by refugee children themselves and by the wider community of refugees as outsiders. However, in separate programs refugee children and young people can build supportive relationships with one another that endure after their entry into the general education system.
- Early interaction with the general education system provides refugee children and young people opportunities to learn the target language and about the culture of the receiving society.
- Separate programs can serve as a place for delivering other specialist integration support (e.g. orientation programs) which may be difficult to deliver in a class environment involving both refugees and nationals.
- While the aim of separate programs is to prepare refugee children and young people for entry into the wider school system and to empower them to interact within it, some newcomers may find the transition from the relatively protected environment of a specialist program to the wider system stressful. This transition needs to be carefully managed.