

Approaches to teaching and engaging students from refugee backgrounds in Enabling Programs

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Culturally responsive and enabling approaches to teaching and engaging students of refugee backgrounds

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Overview

Context of the research

Aims

Methods

Pedagogies: Culturally responsive and enabling pedagogies

Findings

Recommendations

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SfRBs at UniSA College

The only data available for UniSA College is for the number of Humanitarian Visa (HV) holders, with data available from 2012 onwards; from 2012 to the start of 2024, there were 340 HV holders enrolled.

Some further insight into actual numbers can be gained from country of birth. In SP2 2022, a total of 191 MFFS students were overseas born, with many coming from refugee-producing countries or countries that have been used as transit countries by refugees.

Some students are refugee-like. A 'refugee-like' background means that they had experienced forced migration, living in (a) refugee camp(s), and been exposed to torture or traumatic events but had not been ascribed refugee status in Australia (Baker et al., 2018).

Context and aims

One historically under-represented group are students from refugee-backgrounds (SfRBS).

There is a critical need to develop programs and strategies to support SfRBs to participate meaningfully and achieve meaningful success in their studies. A 'one-size-fits-all' generic model of academic support is inadequate as it does not meet the specific and unique needs of such students (Sidhu and Naidoo, 2018).

Opportunities, resources and support that enable capability, build confidence and foster belonging must be made available to **students from diverse and under-represented backgrounds** to build **greater equity in higher education (Burke et al., 2016)**

To develop best practice approaches based on enabling and culturally responsive pedagogies to enable meaningful participation of SfRBs

TOWARD AN AUSTRALIAN CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

A narrative review of the literature



Anne Morrison
Lester-Irabinna Rigney
Robert Hattam
Abigail Diplock

Culturally responsive pedagogies

There is a growing body of evidence that culturally responsive pedagogical practices improve academic success for other groups of marginalized students (Castagno & Brayboy 2008; Perso, 2012; Rigney & Hattam, 2018).

There are many CRPs.

We draw on approaches by **Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995)** and **Geneva Gay (2010)** and the Australian conception by **Morrison, Rigney, Hattam and Diplock (2021)**.

CRPs are:

those pedagogies that value, and mobilise as resources, the cultural repertoires and intelligences that students bring to the learning relationship. Such pedagogies are taken to be intrinsically dialogic and critically conscious, opening up generative and decolonising possibilities. This conceptualisation rests on the premise that all curriculum and pedagogy are culturally based (Morrison et al. 2021, p. 1).

Culture has a profound impact on teaching and learning, as it strongly influences attitudes, values and behaviours of both students and teachers (Gay 2002)

CRP [empowers] students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 382).

Culturally responsive educators

- **set high standards for students;**
- **teaching is multidimensional** as they engage with multiple facets of **student lifeworlds;**
- they embrace **multicultural** curricula
- teaching embraces social, emotional, and political aspects as they seek to provide a **holistic learning experience** and build learning communities (Gay, 2002);
- they aim for **transformation** by utilising a **strengths-based approach** and
- they are **emancipatory**, aiming for liberation from oppressive educational practices (Aronson and Laughter, 2016)



Enabling pedagogies

Enabling pedagogies (Bennett et al., 2016; Stokes, 2014; Hattam et al., 2023) are founded in critical pedagogies and include:

- **social justice commitment,**
- **dialogic**
- **democratic approaches (Bennett et al., 2016)**
- **transformative (Freire & Shor)**
- **foster critical consciousness and the development of student 'voice' (Motta & Bennett, 2018).**
- **Culturally responsive**

Enabling Pedagogies

A participatory conceptual mapping of practices at the University of Newcastle, Australia

Anna Bennett
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Emma Hamilton
Cathy Burgess
Shirley West
Kim Day
Shirley Linn-Ryan
Jan Abbingh



Enabling and inclusive pedagogies

- connecting with student life worlds (Moll et al., 1992)
- sense of belonging
- ethos of care
- sense of hope
- negotiated curriculum
- challenging tasks
- scaffolding and prioritising a plurality of learning styles
- holistic view of success



Critical reflexivity of the teacher is also ‘a requirement for maintaining the capacity to understand, engage with and enable students’ (Motta & Bennett, 2018, p. 636).

Methods

Individual interviews with SfRBs:

- 10 interviews with SfRBs
- Countries of origin: Congo, born in Zambia (1), Afghanistan (5), Pakistan of Afghan decent (1), Burma (1), Syria (2).

Focus groups:

- 1 focus group with three tutors.
- 1 focus group with three PASS leaders.
- 2 focus groups with four peer support officers from the Refugee Support Group.
- 2 focus groups with five course coordinators.
- Courses focused on: University Studies and three literacy courses.

Overview of findings

The aim of this presentation is to show best practice approaches for teaching SfRBs that arise from this research:

1. Challenge deficit discourses
2. Strong, positive teacher-student relationships
3. Tailored approaches to SfRBs learning needs and socio-cultural experiences.
4. Respect and connect with the languages, cultures, and lived experiences of SfRBs

Theme 1: Challenge deficit discourses

*'we have those **stereotypes and assumption and labelling**... a deficit view... And... **it's very dangerous**, because... I'm not going to be patient [with a SfRB] because I don't think you will get it because of this [refugee background]' (Tutor FG).*

This also requires teachers to critically reflect on their positionality.

This also means recognising the strength, agency and aspirations of SfRBs.

*'those students have **multiple identities** and "**refugee**" is only one aspect of it... they have a very rich background' (CC FG)*

Theme 2: Strong, positive teacher-student relationships.

Staff voice:

*'we create an environment where we do reach out... and build that relationship with them... that's been a **really important part of our pedagogy**' (CC FG)*

Student voice:

*I... really appreciate... that they understand that we're not... all... from Australia... So I didn't study... what... this guy next to me study before... I was studying as well, but not the same... [Educators] **gave you [opportunities] to ask question... it's like big, big support** (Aisha).*

*I realised **they listen us and they understand us**, that what's going on – they helped us. In every week **they say if you have problem, you can visit us and – or email us** (Anousheh).*

Theme 3: Tailored approaches to SfRBs learning needs and socio-cultural experiences.

1. Teach 'hidden curriculum'

'So it's not just about [teaching] the content. It's not just about our discipline. It's also about that kind of hidden curriculum' (CC FG)

'you've got the hidden curriculum of blended learning and, and operating externally' (CC FG)

Theme 3: Tailored approaches to SfRBs learning needs and socio-cultural experiences

Develop academic skills and English language

The most common challenges identified by SfRBs were:

- developing academic skills
- navigating university life
- the language barrier
- social isolation
- and juggling university study with other commitments such as employment or family responsibilities; staff recognised these challenges.

*‘Everyone showed **empathy for my challenges as SfRB**’ (Basir)*

- Supports should be offered without singling out SfRBs, and it is likely that other equity groups would equally benefit.

*‘I **wouldn’t want to be treated different**, if they know I’m a refugee I don’t want them to be like: “she’s a refugee, we should pay more attention on her”... I would want to be treated as other people. At the same time, **it’s important so they know ways they could help me**’ (Hazida).*

Theme 3: Tailored approaches to SfRBs learning needs and socio-cultural experiences

Being trauma informed

*‘So how do we as educators best approach students... **without retraumatizing them**, or potentially causing damage individually, either to the educator, [or] to the student’ (CC FG)*

*‘And I’ve tried to design **a curriculum that’s very sensitive, sensitive to the traumatic backgrounds** that they have had’ (CC FG)*

Staff identified that they require training on trauma-informed strategies.

Theme 4: Respect and connect with the languages, cultures, and lived experiences of SfRBs

Respectful and inclusive classrooms:

*'I just want students to feel comfortable... because... **if they're curious, and they feel supported, or that they belong, then that's where... learning happen[s],** if we don't have... their... initial needs met, and they're scared or they're anxious. They're not going to learn' (CC FG).*

*'for everyone their culture and their lifestyle is beautiful... In that kind of situation, you... are really encouraged to talk about yourself and your culture. And if you think, overall... the atmosphere will be very positive and... **it makes you feel like you're at home, you're safe, you're happy in here...** people are interested in you and your culture... the negative thoughts that you have about not having a place in the society and stuff, they are proven wrong' (Basir).*

Theme 4: Respect and connect with the languages, cultures, and lived experiences of SfRBs

Connecting to student life worlds:

*‘student engagement comes from students seeing that... it's interesting, that **it relates to them and draws on their experience**. And they have **choice**’ (CC FG).*

Staff provided opportunities for sharing lived experiences and cultures through ice-breaking activities and reflective assessments.

*‘when I first came [to Australia]... I realised that lack of information for people with refugee background... is a major problem. There are... a lot of websites, but you do not have an information hub... and see what opportunities you have for education, transportation, health, and... lifestyle... **I pitched this idea** that I can make a website full of information for everything [for the assessment] and the teacher really liked it... **It was a really nice experience**’. (Basir)*

Theme 4: Respect and connect with the languages, cultures, and lived experiences of SfRBs

Multilingualism:

*[Students are encouraged to] use their entire linguistic repertoire... if they need to use any of... those language translation tools, I'm all for it, because... that's about **linguistic access**... [and I] enable my students to use... their home languages within the classroom... (CC FG)*

*I encourage... student[s] to find resources about this [presentation] topic, not only in English, but also in your own language... to... **reduce the cognitive load**... if they already know a little bit better [the] content,... **they tend to work on the language side of it** (Tutor FG).*

*I do try to encourage my students... to look at themselves as being **bilingual or multilingual**, and they've got this... **repertoire of languages**... I would think that a lot of them have never really thought of it in that capacity (CC FG).*

Key recommendations

- **Challenge deficit discourse in self and others**
 - Acknowledge student agency, strength and aspiration
 - Critically reflect on own positionality
- **Tailored approaches**
 - Teach hidden curriculum
 - Tailored language and academic support
 - Be trauma-informed
- **Build strong relationships**
 - Share own experiences of migration and / or educational challenges
 - Connect via popular culture (e.g. Bollywood, soccer)
 - Listen and ask students about their needs
 - Be proactive in offering support but without singling students out

Key recommendations

- **Respect and connect with the languages, cultures, and lived experiences of SfRBs**
 - Respectful and inclusive classrooms
 - Allow home language use in classrooms
 - Allow students to share about their lives and cultures
 - Provide choice in assessments
 - Challenge dominance of Western knowledge / invite students to look at an issue from different perspectives and validate different perspectives
 - Make accommodations for assignment due dates for celebrations such as Ramadan, Chinese New Year