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Educating in the context of 'Dispersal': rural schools and refugee-background students

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ABSTRACT

Policies of dispersal are increasingly favoured internationally for the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers. With forty percent of the world's forcibly displaced people being school-aged children, the dispersal of refugee-background people into regional areas means that rural schools are central sites of community response to refugees. Little is known in published research about how rural schools engage in refugee education within the policy context of 'dispersal'. This review of relevant literature examines the educational dimensions of dispersal policies, drawing on research in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Sweden. Research linking refugee resettlement, refugee education and rurality shows a complex interplay between histories of exclusion and contemporary challenges in both the construction of rural spaces, and the deployment of humanitarian dispersal policies at national and international levels. This literature is thematically organised to show that in refugee education within a policyscape of dispersal, rural schools may be 1) operating in racialised community contexts; 2) working within poorly resourced infrastructure; 3) unfamiliar with refugee-background students; and, despite these challenges, they may become 4) key sites of resistance, creativity and support for refugee-background students and their families.

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Introduction

International humanitarian policy continues to increasingly centre refugee resettlement through regionalisation and ruralisation. This contested policyscape of *dispersal* tends to be situated within a population management rationale. In this context, it is timely to draw together the growing body of knowledge about the resettlement of refugee-background populations into rural and regional areas as a contribution to understanding the experiences of rural schools in the provision of refugee education. This review of rural refugee education literature draws from existing research of the past decade in Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Sweden and contributes an international perspective on rural schools as emerging and complex sites of response in the global refugee context.

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In the face of humanitarian need globally, many nations have made use of dispersal policies to distribute resettling populations amongst metropolitan and rural areas. The major rationales underpinning the dispersal of humanitarian entrants are dependent on the national context, but policy approaches tend to align with one or more of the following policy foci:

- 1) The desire to avoid concentrations of humanitarian entrants ‘enclaves’ (Danzer and Yaman 2013, 315) that might create barriers to successful settlement and integration (Dahlberg and Valeyatheepillay 2019);
- 2) The desire to reduce the ‘burden’ of humanitarian entrants on metropolitan populations and services (Boswell 2003; DoHA 2019; Robinson 2003) and
- 3) The belief that resettling populations can rejuvenate rural and regional areas that are experiencing population and economic decline (Boese 2010; DoHA 2019).

The forms of dispersal policy are also dependent on national context. For example, dispersal in the United Kingdom is mandatory for asylum seekers, with no choice or preference in resettlement location (Dahlberg and Valeyatheepillay 2019). Similar policies in Denmark and Sweden focus on the dispersal of humanitarian entrants across metropolitan and rural spaces proportional to population (Edin, Fredriksson, and Åslund 2003). The German quota system also aims for proportional dispersal, but goes further by providing incentives for people to remain in dispersed locations and penalising those who relocate (Dahlberg and Valeyatheepillay 2019; Laubenthal 2016). Australia has similarly used a regional resettlement programme, aiming to redirect up to 50% of humanitarian entrants away from metropolitan centres by 2022 (DoHA 2019).

It follows that rural schools across these countries are challenged to navigate a changing and changeable wider policy environment, as well as attending to localised historic and contemporary conditions when responding to a population of students with whom they have had limited prior experience: those from refugee backgrounds. Reviews into regional and rural resettlement contend that rural areas and refugee populations can experience mutually beneficial engagement, with rural spaces being quieter, calmer and more accessible to new arrivals (Piper 2017). Further, resettlement reports also suggest that refugees provide invaluable population growth in areas with population and economic decline (Piper 2017; SCoA 2017). That said, resettlement reviews indicate that significant challenges remain in the provision of material, social and economic conditions required to facilitate successful settlement (SCoA 2017; van Kooy, Wickes, and Ali 2019).

This article draws on rurality scholarship to explore the contestations of rural identities and spaces to frame the discussion. Traditional conceptualisations tend to highlight the relatively static and homogenous sociocultural nature of rural areas (Briskman 2012; Jupp 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2003a; Radford 2016). Currently, rural spaces are understood to experience significant socioeconomic challenges, conceptualised as under-developed and disadvantaged in the face of metro-centric policy and programme development (Cloke 2012; Corbett 2015). While acknowledging these challenging historic and contemporary conditions, rurality scholars also challenge the notion of a singular rural, rather suggesting that rural spaces are multiple in nature and differ greatly across and between nations (Cloke 2012; Corbett 2015; Neal 2002). This study engages with rurality

scholarship to frame and discuss the experiences of rural schools in the provision of refugee education and theorises the ways that these schools are positioned within national-level dispersal practices and the wider global refugee crisis.

Methodological considerations

This article sought to review existing rural refugee education research in order to synthesise key knowledge for rural schools operating within a dispersal policy context. Key terms (see Table 1), and data parameters from 2010–2020 were selected and searched through education and social science databases, including A+ Education (RMIT); Education Database (ProQuest); ERIC Database (Education Resources and Information Centre); Humanities and Social Sciences Collection (RMIT); MAIS (RMIT); SAGE Journals Education (SAGE). These searches resulted in the selection of 19 articles for review and analysis. Date and terminology choices were designed to capture a contemporary understanding of existing research about rural schools and their work with refugee-background students.

This choice of search terminology is important, since use of the term ‘*refugee*’ is complex and contested. While the term exists and is used in a range of social, cultural, legislative and historical contexts, in the Australian context for example, the term ‘refugee’ tends to refer to an individual who has successfully claimed refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This means that they have met the standard definition of a refugee as ‘people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country’ (UNHCR 2020b). That said, migration researchers note the way in which terms such as ‘refugee’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘boat person’ and ‘migrant’ are used interchangeably to refer to a person not born in their country of settlement (Neumann and Gifford 2017; Morrissey and Schalley 2017). Commentators also note the way media and public figures also use these terms interchangeably, and often in the context of expressing politicised narratives about migration (De Conick 2020; Goodman, Sirriyeh, and McMahon 2017; Morrissey and Schalley 2017). This article is not using the term ‘refugee’ to reference those specifically received through the variety of international channels, but rather to capture the schooling experiences of those who have lived experience of forced displacement. For this article to accurately capture research about students who come from forcibly displaced backgrounds, it was acknowledged that in different national contexts, refugees may be also referred to as ‘newcomers’, ‘asylum seekers’, ‘migrants’ or ‘undocumented’. Search terms were broadened to capture relevant research.

A thematic review of the 19 identified studies involved a primary and secondary reading to familiarise with content and develop overarching core themes. The reviewed

Table 1. Search terms.

Primary Term	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative	Alternative
‘refugee*’ AND ‘education*’ AND ‘rural*’	OR ‘migrant*’ OR ‘schooling*’ OR ‘regional*’	OR ‘undocumented*’ OR ‘secondary school*’ OR ‘provincial*’	OR ‘asylum seeker*’ OR ‘high school*’ OR ‘remote*’	OR ‘newcomer*’ OR ‘isolated*’

papers were then examined through a tertiary reading to explore thematic trends across existing rural refugee education research, with four core findings emerging to indicate that in the education of refugee-background students, schools in a dispersal context may be operating within:

- 1) racialised community contexts;
- 2) poorly resourced infrastructure contexts;
- 3) unfamiliar or uncertain contexts;
- 4) and yet these schools may become key sites of resistance, creativity and support for refugee-background students and their families.

Findings

Operating in racialised community contexts

A central finding across eight studies was that rural schools often have to contend with racialised community contexts. In order to discuss community racialisation, it is important to note that constructions of the rural and who belongs in it have historic roots. Explorations of British rural identity noted that rurality is situated in romanticised reflections of rural spaces as agricultural wellsprings of wealth (Holloway 2007; Neal 2002). Rural areas are often represented as spaces of simple living fostered by traditional values, hard work and civility (Hubbard 2005; Neal and Walters 2008). Theorists suggest that these constructions are coded in language depicting rural areas as white spaces that ‘act as repository of English values and culture’ (Holloway 2007, 8). In this sense, rural areas in the United Kingdom are racialised through their historic constructions as spaces of traditional whiteness (Bryant and Pini 2010; Myers and Bhopal 2017). In a similar way, researchers in the United States have explored the social construction of rural spaces, particularly highlighting the connection between dominant sociocultural elements that reinforce historic understandings of rurality as traditional and even backward (Alkon and Traugot 2008).

Rural Australian populations have also been understood as traditionally Euro-centric, with strong identity links to settler narratives (Jupp 2007; Missingham, Dibden, and Cocklin 2006). Such populations have been historically culturally homogenous, with strong conservative values (McConaghy 2006; Radford 2016). Rural spaces were conceptualised as hard-working farming environments in which close-knit small communities were essential to the survival of all (Cuervo 2016; Radford 2016). That said, rural spaces have also been recognised as alienating environments for people who fail to assimilate into the area’s cultural norms (Briskman 2012; McConaghy 2006). Similarly, territoriality has been noted in studies of rurality, as generational farming communities have traditionally ascribed to the settler sense of ownership over land that has been worked across generations (Hage 2000). It is important to note that these contemporary rural understandings of land ownership in the Australian context stem from a colonial history in which First Nations’ belonging and identity was legally nullified and *terra nullius* declared such that the land was classified as empty (Moreton-Robinson 2003a). Settler narratives historically and contemporarily continue to assert territorial ownership and dominance, national identity and values of socioeconomic mobility in rural spaces today (Jupp 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2003b).

It is in this historic and contemporary context that we understand the ways that rural refugee education studies report the presence of systemic racism in rural schools. Four studies reviewed identified that these schools can be sites where racialised speech and practices are reproduced by staff and students. In Butler's (2016) 18-month ethnographic project in a rural Australian primary school, it was noted that local children actively reproduced racialised and discriminatory discourse about 'refugees' and 'queue jumpers' (346). Butler (2016) found that local discourse about refugee-background populations as threats to socioeconomic opportunities were shared by school students in classrooms and the schoolyard, even while these students dichotomously engaged in friendly peer relationships with refugee-background students. In a rural Australian secondary school, Edgeworth (2015) also found examples of explicit racist behaviour and speech experienced by two refugee-background students and shared anecdotally by two majority students. Of particular note is the openness by which these majority students disclosed their avoidance of refugee-background students due to potential social ramifications. Edgeworth (2015) notes the way that students identified as Other to the hegemonic white majority were 'discursively cast as 'problems' in schools (while concurrently whiteness goes unexamined)' (354). In the US context, three studies discussed the ways in which visibly different Others were limited by the attitudes and practices of rural schools. Refugee-background students recounted the way a teacher described young white women feeling fearful in the town centre due to the presence of migrant male youths (Ortiz 2016). The students, while bemused by these remarks, expressed a clear understanding of the racialised message indicating a belief that town spaces 'should presumably exclude scary Latino men' (Ortiz 2016, 276). Gonzales and Ruiz (2014) also found that undocumented youth in two secondary schools experienced racist and exclusionary attitudes from staff that tended to position them as unlikely to access further education and therefore not a priority. These young people in precarious contexts found that school staff tended to dismiss their knowledge and experience and reproduce community-held views about the limited future opportunities for undocumented youth (Gonzales and Ruiz 2014). In a similar fashion, Lester and Anders (2013) explored the streamlining of refugee-background students into special education classrooms and the racialised way school staff, practices and assessment materials constructed a homogenous and exclusionary normative standard of ability.

While rural schools can be sites in which direct racism takes place, systemic racism is also a concern. Several papers reviewed highlighted structural issues that created difficulty in addressing incidents of racism and exclusion in the school environment due to wider local discourses that refute race or racism within community identity (Cuervo 2016; Myers and Bhopal 2017). One rural primary school in the United Kingdom demonstrated significant inaction in the face of racist attacks on diverse students, and researchers suggested that this was, in part, due to the local narrative that racism doesn't exist within the community (Myers and Bhopal 2017). In rural Canada, researchers noted the hyper-visibility of 'difference' for refugee-background students and the ways that the rural school's approach to this new and 'different' cohort was to complete a range of testing, positioning newcomers against white normative standards of knowledge and ability (Usman 2012). Similarly, Torrez (2014) notes the way that tense misunderstandings between refugee-background students and staff occurred in a rural US school because how the curriculum was situated within a dominant, normative

worldview. Two Australian projects and one US study also highlight the ways that refugee-background students experience inadvertent or explicit exclusion due to the invisibility of whiteness as a normative structure in schools. Colvin (2017) noted that in rural areas, difference is hyper-visible and that refugee-background students are disadvantaged by the framing of culturally diverse students as outside or Other to the normative cultural group. Edgeworth and Santoro (2015) also found that across three regional Australian schools, staff and students often struggled to recognise whiteness as an ethnicity that frames the practices and structure of the school but instead view whiteness as a normative standard to which difference is compared. Ortiz (2016) explored the inclusion of migrant and refugee-background young people in a rural US school and found a pervasive resistance within the school community to recognise race and ethnicity as relevant structural realities for students and their families. Responses from staff and community members tended to reflect a discomfort with the mention of race, ethnicity or culture, and regularly conflated issues experienced by refugee-background and migrant students with poverty, rendering race invisible (Ortiz 2016). From the position of white normativity, rural schools can become spaces of unintentional exclusion for refugee-background students. Such studies indicate that rural schools and communities can be sites in which racialised populations are problematised, racism is denied and students from diverse cultural backgrounds are disadvantaged. While schools might try to subvert broader racialised community contexts, community views and practices can make their way into classrooms and contribute to experiences of exclusion for refugee-background students.

Operating in poorly resourced contexts

Alongside the cultural and community challenges of rural schooling, education literature highlights that rural schools experience staffing, funding and material challenges that stem from their isolated locations and the perpetuation of metro-centric approaches to education policy and provision (Brennan 2005; Kline, Soejatminah, and Walker-Gibbs 2014). Given their large catchment areas (McConaghy 2006) and the slow increase in regional population due to in-migration (Capeness 2015), these schools are often expected to provide for student populations that are diverse in ability, age, location, Indigeneity, background and educational experience (Capeness 2015; McConaghy 2006). In a real sense, rural schools are expected to do more with less. As such, these schools find creative ways to meet increasing needs through technology and local liaison and connection. This challenge was reflected in twelve studies which indicated that rural schools experience significant resourcing challenges in their efforts to provide accessible education for refugee background students. Two Australian research projects found that funding and resourcing for the specific needs of refugee-background students was obstructed by policy mechanisms such as 'critical mass' requirements (Wilkinson and Langat 2012; Colvin 2017). These mechanisms require a predetermined number of students with specific needs in order to respond with funding, and the dispersed and isolated nature of rural schools meant that a critical mass of refugee-background students, and therefore resourcing for these students, was sometimes unattainable (Wilkinson and Langat 2012; Colvin 2017). A number of papers noted that resourcing challenges obstructed the provision of a more varied curriculum with specialist learning

opportunities. Studies in Australia and the United States found that families were concerned about the long term opportunities for their children due to staffing and subject availability in rural schools, and some refugee-background families enrolled their children in extra-curricular activities in order to meet the deficit or were even considering relocating from the regional areas for this reason (Mayes and McAreavey 2017; Gonzales and Ruiz 2014).

Staffing remains perhaps the most pertinent challenge for rural schools. Schooling research articulates the significant challenges experienced by these schools in recruiting and retaining qualified staff (Corbett 2015; Cuervo 2016). Staffing shortage alongside the increasing population rate in rural areas has led to calls for universities and schools to specifically recruit student-teachers from these areas to meet the needs of rural schools (Capeness 2015). Consequently, schools have a high proportion of early career teachers and new graduates, often attracted by opportunities for fast-tracked permanency (White 2019). While early career and new graduate teachers can be welcome inclusions to a school, their lack of classroom experience and rural-specific training has been linked to poorer student outcomes (Corbett 2016; McConaghy 2006) and contributes to the high staff turnover (White 2019). Several studies also found that staff in these schools often lacked classroom experience and compounded issues regarding the use of culturally accessible learning materials (Lester and Anders 2013; Usman 2012; Torrez 2014). These staffing challenges were reiterated more specifically in the efforts to provide refugee education in rural schools. The recruitment and retention of staff experienced in refugee education is particularly difficult in these areas. Research undertaken in schools in Australia, the United States, Canada and Sweden indicated that rural refugee education is complicated by a lack of experience and training for school staff (Obondo 2018; Ortiz 2016; Torrez 2014; Usman 2012; Wilkinson and Langat 2012). Furthermore, schools face challenges in the recruitment of diverse staff members with lived experiences of migration or cultural difference, and this also contributes to difficulties in creating diverse and culturally responsive school environments (Colvin 2017; Ortiz 2016; Torrez 2014).

It can be argued that community infrastructure significantly impacts the settlement experiences of refugee-background young people, and this impact also finds its way into the classroom. These studies found that in the absence of external support services, rural schools themselves had to bridge the gap and provide services in a more informal manner (Joyce and Liamputtong 2017; Wilkinson and Langat 2012; Wille et al. 2019). These schools were responding to complex needs and situations to which their training and experience did not apply, and this unfamiliarity and uncertainty with refugee education contributed to poor support for and misunderstandings of refugee-background students, as discussed further below (Lester and Anders 2013; Usman 2012). Professional learning would be a key component of building the experience and confidence necessary to address diverse student needs. As such, access to professional learning opportunities and professional networks are vital in the development of new and early career teachers' practice (White 2019).

Several studies reviewed for this paper further indicate that the isolation of school sites resulted in difficulties accessing effective professional learning and support communities. Australian researchers found that rural school staff had a desire to acquire knowledge and skills in refugee education, but often found it difficult to access relevant professional

development (Major et al. 2013; Wilkinson and Langat 2012). Even where training was provided, the quality of the professional development was problematic. For a rural school in the United States, Ortiz (2016) noted that the training provided to staff heavily centred a deficit perception of refugee-background students' that reinforced the ignorance of staff towards the more complex structural obstructions to refugee education. In schools where professional development was not easily accessible, studies instead found that a small number of school staff acquired experience in refugee education and became key staff upon which the broader school community relied to 'deal with' refugee-background students (Torrez 2014; Wille et al. 2019).

Operating in unfamiliar and uncertain contexts

A significant barrier to effective refugee education in rural schools is the lack of prior contact and experience between staff and diverse student cohorts. As discussed above, rural and regional areas in many national contexts can be spaces of limited diversity, meaning that prior to recent population shifts, the student demographics of local schools have been traditionally homogenised. Nine studies noted that schools often lack experience with diverse students and this lack of familiarity can result in exclusionary or ignorant practice. Some teachers in rural Canadian primary schools disclosed to researchers that they had no previous experience with culturally diverse students (Usman 2012). Similarly, eleven teachers in regional Swedish schools requested the support of researchers to understand and develop better approaches to refugee education in response to the rapid increase of refugee-background students in previously homogenous schools (Obondo 2018). Three studies in the US found that rural school staff were unfamiliar with undocumented students and unfamiliar with the structural realities that constrain those students in their education and future planning (Gonzales and Ruiz 2014; Torrez 2014; Wille et al. 2019). It was also noted that while the broader migrant community expressed a preference for bilingual learning, the lack of diverse teachers and lack of language ability across staff resulted in teachers who were not confident to facilitate more linguistically accessible classrooms (Torrez 2014). In the Australian context, Colvin (2017) found that rural school staff were primarily white and had varying levels of cultural understanding.

Reviewed studies also indicated that staff unfamiliarity and uncertainty resulted, in some cases, in misdiagnoses and misunderstandings of students' abilities and attitudes. Usman (2012) explored the settlement of refugee-background students into rural Canadian primary schools, where school staff had little to no experience with diverse student cohorts. They found misinterpretations of student behaviour and communication, such as minimal eye contact, resulted in perceptions of students as disengaged or avoidant (Usman 2012). Furthermore, misunderstandings of communication styles resulted in the conflation of communication differences with formal diagnoses of communication or learning disorders. Generally, assessments for these concerns relied heavily on culturally inaccessible testing and the subjective reporting of teacher observations (Usman 2012). In a similar exploration of the streamlining of refugee-background students into special education classrooms in rural US schools, Lester and Anders (2013) suggest that school staff were under-prepared to provide education and assessment for culturally diverse students. They found that the use of assessment rooted in white

normative expectations risked the misdiagnosis, labelling and monitoring of refugee-background students through a deficit paradigm (Lester and Anders 2013).

Finally, rural teachers demonstrated uncertainty in contacting refugee-background families. In a rural US school, Ortiz (2016) found that staff tended to hold a deficit view of parents, believing that refugee-background parents were disengaged and uninterested in education. This view appeared to emerge from teachers' unfamiliarity with cultural understandings and expectations of schooling, in which refugee-background parents believed school staff to be experts and that parents should leave staff to manage anything related to school (Ortiz 2016). Similar misunderstandings were also found in another US rural school, where parents were criticised as being uncaring about the future of their children (Torrez 2014). Family participants suggested that schools could facilitate direct communication the migrant community through the employment of diverse staff members (Torrez 2014). In these examples, we see how the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of school staff can result (often unintentionally) in misunderstanding and exclusion for students and their families.

Sites of creativity, resistance and support

While the challenges facing rural schools and refugee students are complex and varied, it is important to reflect on the ways that schools operate as central sites of welcome, acceptance, creativity, resistance and support for refugee-background students and their families. The resettlement of refugee-background populations into rural areas with service provision deficits is a complex task, and schools are often the primary space of support and social connection within communities (Joyce and Liamputtong 2017; Major et al. 2013; Ortiz 2016; Wilkinson and Langat 2012). An Australian study of the wellbeing of refugee-background youth in rural areas found that schools can be critical spaces in which social and cultural capital can develop for refugee-background students and their families (Joyce and Liamputtong 2017). Similarly, Major et al. (2013) note the importance of schools in facilitating more informal support networks within the broader community. In the US, Ortiz (2016) reflected on the centrality of a rural school in the fabric and infrastructure of the area, and therefore its importance in enabling or constraining broader community inclusion.

These studies also recognised that schools, and specific staff members in particular, often go above and beyond in the provision of care and support, bridging the service gap for refugee-background students and their families. Often teachers with roles specific to language acquisition became central figures in the coordination of holistic support. At a regional Australian school, Wilkinson and Langat (2012) found that these staff members were advocating for students, building engagement opportunities with families, and finding ways to meet practical and immediate needs for students and their families. Similarly, studies into the future planning for refugee-background students beyond their schools in both Australia and the US noted the importance of an individual teacher or school leader as an advocate and champion (Naidoo 2015; Gonzales and Ruiz 2014). While not directly discussed in the reviewed literature, it should be noted that some education research suggests that the prevalence of early career teachers in rural schools can result in new ideas and new energy (Capeness 2015; McConaghy 2006). Rural schools with early career teachers can experience increased enthusiasm,

a sense of renewal and a necessitated ongoing commitment to professional learning (Capeness 2015). Research from Canada and the United Kingdom suggest that early career teachers also have a significant role to play in challenging local discourses of cultural homogeneity (de Freitas and McAuley 2008). In this way, the possibilities that individual teachers and staff members present in the provision of refugee education shows that rural schools have often untapped and unrecognised resources to address the new challenges that lie ahead.

A final way that rural schools operate as sites of possibility in the area of refugee education is the way that these staff members recognise elements of unfamiliarity and uncertainty, seek learning opportunities. Teachers in a Swedish study engaged in professional learning and group reflection on their practice over several months in order to improve their confidence and the outcomes of their increasingly diverse students (Obondo 2018). A similar study was conducted in Australia, whereby regional school staff met to discuss pedagogy and practice approaches for refugee education (Wilkinson and Langat 2012). These teachers noted the role that they play in coordinating support for refugee-background students, and their desire to have a stronger sense of how to do so effectively (Wilkinson and Langat 2012). With training and community engagement, rural schools can learn the specific needs of their student cohort and respond accordingly. Ortiz (2016) noted the significant changes made by a rural US school once staff and leadership became aware of culturally relevant approaches, including altering disciplinary policies to reflect cultural differences in communication and avoid these differences resulting in penalty and exclusion. In difficult local and national contexts, rural schools and staff can operate as safe havens, responsive sites that can either facilitate or hinder the inclusion and settlement of refugee-background students into the wider community.

What now? a pandemic and new challenges

Rural refugee education literature between 2010–2020 highlights the unique challenges faced by schools in the context of dispersal policies increasingly used in the settlement of refugee and asylum-seeking people. While schools aim to provide accessible and equitable educational opportunities in their local contexts, challenges of racialisation, resourcing, infrastructure and unfamiliarity remain and become further heightened in the context of recent events.

COVID-19 has seen a monumental shift in policies of dispersal and refugee resettlement altogether. In some countries such as Australia, resettlement programmes have been suspended or drastically reduced during the pandemic due to international border closures and subsequently, funding for settlement services and programmes has been cut significantly (RCoA 2020; UNHCR 2020a). In particular, funding for new refugee-background children to engage with intensive language learning has stopped with the suspension of new arrivals, and as such, settlement programmes and some Intensive English Language Programmes (IELPs) have been reduced or closed altogether. While IELPs and other settlement services predominantly work with newly arrived students, the personnel and programmes often remain core sites of support for refugee-background students throughout their schooling journey beyond the learning of English. These closures therefore result in already under-resourced rural and regional

schools having to respond to complex student needs without the relevant skills and expertise held by IELP staff.

Anecdotally, recent meetings with industry partners in Australian education sectors have revealed ongoing concerns about the accessibility of distance and online learning for refugee-background students as states continue to grapple with the unpredictability of COVID-related closures and lockdowns. Poor access to technology and internet services amongst refugee-background families, many of whom may have lost employment during the pandemic, is an ongoing challenge for schools and refugee students (RCoA 2020).

Also of note in this difficult time is the increased uncertainty and hostility towards 'others', in the context of socio-politically generated discourses about the origin of COVID-19 (Tan 2020). Closures of borders also contribute to an increased rhetoric of securitisation and a sense of the need to 'protect our own' (Byaruhanga 2020). These discourses inherently infiltrate communities, schools and classrooms and will have a significant impact on students who are visibly different to the hegemonic norm, and reports of racism and racially-based violence have escalated drastically across the world (HRW 2020; Tan 2020). For rural and regional schools who themselves experience uncertainty and unfamiliarity with more diverse students, the management of these complex social discourses will further contribute to an increased sense of burden in such an unpredictable time.

Finally, it is unknown how settlement quotas and processes may be altered upon the re-opening of international borders and the impact this will have on regional resettlement zones, settlement service funding and schools (Garnier, Sandvik, and Cellini 2020). Arguably, this pause in refugee intake provides a unique political and policy opportunity to meaningfully evaluate the impact and requisite resourcing of policies of dispersal, and to co-develop an improved system of funding and support for rural and regional communities, schools and their students. However, given the continued political rhetoric towards securitisation, a holistic review of policies of dispersal may be unlikely.

These are uncertain times for all, and schools in already complex community contexts will continue to absorb these impacts as they try to best support refugee-background students in their local area. It behoves education researchers to keep an eye on refugee education in the context of dispersal, especially upon the resumption or increase of resettlement in the near future. Researchers can continue to examine and critique the unique resourcing and support challenges faced by schools in zones of dispersal. They can also advocate for in-service teacher education and support for regional teachers who so often are the core supporters of refugee-background students and their families in under-resourced community contexts. The possibilities brought by early career teachers to rural schools also suggests the importance of pre-service teacher education that draws on refugee education knowledge in order to equip new teachers for culturally responsive and relevant practice. Engagement with refugee-background students and their families in rural and regional areas will be essential to further understanding how to provide holistic and inclusive education in a difficult policy context and a generally under-researched area.

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