

Services to Learners with Refugee Experience during COVID19

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There are a number of factors that educators might need to be aware of in the current COVID19 climate that have the potential of adversely impacting on learners with refugee experience.

Recognising the extraordinary pressures on schools / teachers during COVID19 and the need for intentioned and scheduled support and self-care

The presence of COVID19 and government responses to it have placed extraordinary pressures on schools and their staff. Some of the pressures on schools and teachers include:

- Expectations for some teachers to be present at schools while simultaneously developing remote learning strategies
- Trying to find time to adjust to a blended learning environment that includes remote learning
- Needing to develop materials for remote learning
- Maintaining contact with learners in novel ways
- Supporting parents who are unsure how to support their child's learning during COVID-19
- Trying to make sense of mixed messaging regarding risks of group gatherings at school versus health advice regarding social distancing, mask-wearing and disinfecting surfaces
- Responding to parent or family pressure, who have been similarly impacted by the uncertainty caused by responses to COVID19
- Coping with the needs of their own children and families

These conditions are likely to have implications for school staff and possibly for the well-being of teachers and their social-emotional functioning in this climate of heightened uncertainty as COVID19 exerts additional professional and personal demands on an individual's personal resources.

In this context it is helpful that schools develop self-care strategies to enable staff to receive the support they need to maintain their own functioning and to take on the complex tasks related to the delivery of educational services to learners and especially learners with refugee experiences.

Schools may have existing strategies in place that can be enhanced to facilitate support infrastructure across the whole school, the faculty level or through staff-based social resourcing strategies.

Individual teachers may benefit from having time allocated to reflect and monitor their own social-emotional functioning and for drawing on existing resources available such as EAP for counselling. Counselling can assist educators to explore cognitive, emotional, physical and/or behavioural presentations that indicate stress or changes in their functioning. A systemic school response can ensure there are regular and scheduled opportunities for staff to gather, share experiences and problem solve in a COVID-safe way. Having an intentioned self-care strategy at the school or faculty level can be a proactive step in ensuring staff feel supported. A group response to the challenges that face teachers can enhance individual capacity.

At this time, it is also particularly important to collaborate and make use of the expertise of school-based counselling staff, well-being and learning support teams in these conversations and in delivery of services to learners with refugee experience.

Implications for learners with refugee experience, their families or home groups.

It is important to remember that previous trauma can easily be activated by current pandemic response conditions including lockdowns, economic instability, isolation and ongoing stress during COVID19. It may helpful to be aware of the following:

1. In a context of heightened uncertainty as is the condition with the COVID19 crisis, pre-existing trauma can be activated and result in distress, interpersonal conflict and compromised functioning.
2. Trauma reduces the capacity of the nervous system to tolerate many ordinary life stressors.
3. Trauma (and specifically refugee trauma) refers to the impact on the nervous system of an overwhelming experience in which an individual finds themselves helpless.
 - a. Sometimes these experiences are chronic, and continue over an extended period leaving much more serious artefacts on the mind and body.
 - b. When trauma is experienced during development, the impact has the potential to impair healthy development and functioning.
4. It is important as educators to recognise that learners with developmental trauma experiences and the refugee experience may have emotional, behavioural, cognitive and physical presentations in the current societal context of deprivation and pandemic resource management.
5. Trauma has an impact on the capacity of children and young people who have experienced trauma to focus, regulate, and remember.
6. It is very likely that feelings of anxiety and variations in mood will impact on functioning.
7. Trauma in the context of refugee experience also has an impact on interpersonal functioning in which the nervous system develops a perceptual bias toward survival. This, compiled with higher frequencies of interpersonal interactions in families or home groups creates the potential for interpersonal conflict and low mood presentations.
8. This means that the capacity of a learner with refugee experiences to deal with interpersonal conflict or perceptions of negative interpersonal interactions, is also reduced. The overall window of tolerance to stress is reduced and trying to cope with ordinary stressors may become overwhelming.
9. Parents who have gone through the refugee experience may have altered assumptions and expectations about parental responsibility that may not align with our assumed expectations as educators and as people who have not endured the refugee experience.
10. Parents of learners with refugee experience may also come from ancestral social and cultural contexts different to the British Heritage Australian context in which education and parental involvement have very different assumptions about teacher role, parent role and the role of public education. For example, in some Australian cultural contexts, educators may have (class-based) expectations of parents supporting the educational development of children and young people in the home by ensuring they have the basic conditions conducive to learning; are monitored and encouraged to participate in school related activities, are read to or given direction with schoolwork, or given strategies to address their needs with other resources. This may not be the experience or understanding for many learners and their families.
11. Parents also need to be given very explicit, clear, and achievable advice on what they can do to support the learning of children with refugee experiences. For many of these parents the assumptions we hold about schooling and the alliance with parents, does not connect with their experiences of schooling and the social norms that determine parental roles and teacher roles that were part of their socialisation and development in their ancestral homelands.
12. Is important that educators reflect on the assumptions they hold about the role of parents in supporting the education of children and young people, and also consider what kind of supports are possible for families with refugee experience.

Ways of responding to the impact of COVID19 on learners:

The goal of strategies in responding to the impact of COVID19 on vulnerable learners is to reduce anxiety and uncertainty and foster control within the parameters of what is possible in your specific context. You're likely to already be doing this in informal and more structured methods so please approach the following suggestions as needed:

- **Identify at-risk demographics** in your learner population and think of ways that you can check-in on their progress within the limited parameters of your service-delivery models. This strategy can be shared with other resources within your educational institution whether they be counselling services or disability services.

- **Ensure you have a formal communication strategy** to your learners that is accurate, clear and easy to decipher, about how you as a faculty or as individual educators for each of your units will make changes to service delivery in view of the restrictions or changes that have emerged as a result of COVID19
- **Facilitate a forum for learners to be able to ask questions** or raise issues that may concern them
- **Provide a response and strategy to the issues raised by learners and possibly develop an FAQ** that you can send out to learners to assist them make sense of the changes and how they will impact on them.

Vulnerable learners, especially those with refugee experiences, disrupted education, and childhood trauma, may struggle with remembering instructions, and can become anxious if they don't have adequate scaffolding of tasks and assessments. Your goal is to try to remove uncertainty wherever possible and this can be done with explicit practice of what you require: modelling, checklists, and other educational scaffolding technologies. You may be able to do the following.

- **Create checklists for what you require from learners**, these will ensure you are explicit and precise and also provide learners with guidance in a situation where they need greater certainty and direction. Ensure your checklists sequences work in the order the tasks need to be completed.
- **Develop visual tools** that assist learners to map the requirements for each unit. This can be achieved through flowcharts or other graphic organisers, either to manage learning materials, or to help learners sequence their own work.
- **Review any tasks that learners are required to complete for accurate information and explicit instruction.** For example, educators may request a written response to a particular question and not articulate the form of that response. It is important to be clear if you want learners to use first person narrative voice in answering a question or a more formal third person narrative voice. You may also need to provide guidance on the text type that you require, such as whether it should be a report with subheadings or whether you are just seeking a free-form answer.
- **Be aware of your subjectivity and the learner's lived experience.** Learners may not be familiar with idioms, cultural references, positive assumptions about government services, policing, or the broader assumed social norms and cultural values embedded in assessment task formulation. Although this is taxing, it's important to identify what loaded concepts, realities and assumptions inform the tasks used for assessment.
- **Provide model answer samples for learners.** Providing an example of how a question could possibly be answered will assist learners to understand what you require from the task and will allow them to use this framework as a scaffold for their own answers. Be explicit that you are providing this support as a model and explain the idioms, cultural assumptions and social norms embedded in the tasks.
- **Don't expect learners to read substantive passages or documents.** Instead, provide them with smaller chunks through stories, anecdotes, visual media, a summary you have written of the key issues that makes it explicit and accessible.

If you have capacity during this time, make a note of your professional or personal needs so that you can seek further support through professional learning, professional exchange or by developing collective strategies to make educators' work more efficient and facilitate better learning outcomes.