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Traversing the terrain of higher education: experiences of refugee youth on the inside

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a qualitative research study conducted across urban and regional Australian universities. The aim of the project was to investigate the enablers and constraints faced by refugee background students transitioning from high school to university. A refugee is defined as a person who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence [UNHCR(2016). "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016." Accessed January 2019. http://www.refworld.org/docid/594aa38e0.html]. Studies on refugee background students in school contexts have been prolific but research of this population in higher education is still embryonic. This can be attributed to the fact that many refugee background students do not attain the necessary skills required for access to, and participation in, tertiary education in spite of their high aspirations for a university qualification. The paper will show, through the narratives of four refugee background university students that transition at university needs to be reconceptualised as holistic, extending beyond classroom walls and building on the resilience and assets they bring to learning. This is significant because it draws attention to the paradoxical relationship between the rights-based vision that many universities purport to have for their diverse student cohorts and the realities that refugee youth face at university on a daily basis.

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Introduction

Drawing on interviews and case studies of refugee background youth and university staff in Australia (academic and support), the research documented the journeys of refugee background students through the school system to tertiary education and recorded their educational experiences in higher education. It therefore highlights some of the challenges faced by refugee youth as they negotiate the unfamiliar landscape of higher education. Federal policy changes in Australia have followed on from the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, which called for the increased participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley et al. 2008). Refugees are the most vulnerable of migrant populations and their social and economic status is more fraught than other immigration categories in Australia. Universities Australia (Robinson 2018, 15), showed that there was a substantial growth in domestic undergraduate enrolments by

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equity groups in higher education with a 106% increase in students with a disability; 89% increase in Indigenous students; 55% increase in students from low SES and 48% increase in regional and remote students. However, the participation rate of students from refugee background, currently 3506 (Terry et al. 2016), still remains below parity. Additionally, while most Australian universities have established widening participation initiatives and are committed to reshaping teaching and learning, the impact has been erratically spread across institutions.

It is argued that in spite of the aspirations, fortitude and resilience shown by students of refugee background, refugee youth at university still face a range of complex challenges that hinders rather than enables their successful transition and participation at university (Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou, and Langat 2018a). These include their varied pre-settlement experiences such as different socioeconomic backgrounds and mixed English language ability as well as mixed literacy levels in their own languages. Some have had a limited, disrupted or incomplete education while others have not had the opportunity to attend school at all (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 46). It is nevertheless, the lack of a targeted university support programme that is perhaps most disabling. The academic and intellectual expectations held by universities need to be overtly taught to those of refugee background as the university curriculum is developed on assumptions about existing proficiencies and knowledge with no clear sense of the kinds of pedagogies these students require (Lenette and Ingamells 2013).

Beginning with an overview of the theoretical constructions of rights-based education, the paper proceeds to a sociological reading of the issue informed by the rights-based treaties. This is followed by a narrative account of the enabling and constraining factors for refugee-background students in a group of universities in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The paper concludes with some suggestions as to how universities and educators might move to more engaged practices that are better tailored to address the systemic causes of refugee youth alienation.

Rights-based education

Education is a human right and according to article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the right to education is an unchallengeable human right of every child.

> At the level of the student it asks that an education system based on human rights strive for learners; recognize what the learner brings; provide a favourable learning environment; consider the curriculum and enrich the learning processes. At the organizational level, it implies questions of policies, resources, results and supervision. The main argument advanced is that a rights based approach can provide a new way of thinking about education for diversity. (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 35)

Further laws on the rights of a child to education can be seen in UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) which establishes the fundamental principles of equity and access to education. The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), in 1990, stressed the right to education for the omitted. More recently, the Human Rights Council resolution 23/4 (2013) was firm in asserting 'the need to ensure that the right to education is central in the context of the post-2015 agenda'.

Thus for contemporary human rights' discourse, the context of rights is one of mutual recognition (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 19) and is evident in laws on the rights of a child to education such as UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) which establishes the fundamental principles of equity and access to education.

By focusing on refugee students and their transition to university, it is clear that the key processes within a rights-based education are therefore ones that empower young students of refugee background to re-create representations of themselves so that they in turn become full partners in social interaction (Fraser 2001). Similarly, Sen (1985) argued that people differ in their capacity to convert goods into valuable achievements due to personal and locational factors and social arrangements as is the case of refugees. For Tibbitts (2017), rights-based education is not only about valuing and respecting human rights, it is also about supporting human actions that will ensure the conditions in which such rights can be achieved. Given the background to refugees in Australia, it can be seen that the relationship between the teacher and the refugee background student is a strong factor in bringing about social change more particularly in supporting their resettlement needs. The rights-based model emphasises a learner-centred approach that requires empathy and understanding, thus transforming learning in the classroom. By constantly re-affirming that teaching is an act of change, university educators can become aware of the socio-cultural, political context for their teaching and are able to reflect upon their own identities in relation to the identities of their students as it relates to issues of difference, diversity, power and oppression. Educators should therefore attempt to bring together theory and practice for the support and development of skills that are critical for teaching refugee background students and which encourage students of refugee background:

> to ask questions and probe texts, to develop the imagination, to identify with and express solidarity across boundaries, and to recognize themselves as fellow citizens in a cosmopolitan nation and in a wider global community. (Osler 2015, 264)

An important dimension of rights-based education therefore is the:

> active, meaningful and critical participation of communities where their knowledge of culture and language are taken seriously. (Coysh 2014, 96)

and whose:

> authority resides in origin, place, history and ancestry' rather than in institutional and bureaucratic forms. (Coysh 2014, 96)

The 'One-Size fits' all approach to higher education

Currently, university second language support initiatives that target refugee-background students are based on a 'one size fits all approach' for developing academic skills rather than focusing on the different and unique requirements of students requiring support. As such, Uptin, Wright, and Harwood (2016, 599) suggest that students with a refugee background should be viewed in 'light of their individual complex histories' and their capacities built to imagine alternative futures in open-ended ways (Zipin et al. 2013). This would include transition programmes that engage students in the academic life of the university; familiarising them with the university environment, illuminating students

about the ethos of the university and introducing students to the available student welfare services; and teaching and learning processes (James 2008). The lived experiences of students who have experienced integrationist approaches labelled as inclusion suggest that the impact is anything but inclusive or transformational for them (Gibson 2015, 879). While many universities may be committed in theory to equity, they are at the same time expected to be competitive in terms of their enrolments, graduates and research with many aiming to be research-intensive institutions. There is thus a tension between the goals of equity and access and being a world-class research-driven institution. This tension has led to more of a focus in institutions on writing policies rather than enacting policy. Ahmed (2012) describes the focus on paperwork perfectly when she says

> the more time you spend on or with paper, the less time you have to do things with that paper, to explain to people what they are doing. (87)

Universities should be drawing their energies to focus on global citizenship and socially and culturally responsive research and pedagogies that are mutually beneficial and in keeping with their social justice mission. This is particularly important as an increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Australia due to global conflict, has led to increases in the number of new migrant students both forced and skilled, aspiring to higher education.

Instead, policies and practices in Australian higher education are currently framed by neoliberalist and economic rationalist perspectives that require 'learning to play (and master) the game of power' and in the university context this requires learning a new logic of practice' (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 107) where inequity is normalised and performativity is heightened at the expense of robust redistribution and collective engagement. What is important is the development of erudite, theorised and introspective approaches that are sustainable and guided by praxis-oriented understandings of the inequities in higher education (Burke 2013, 109).

The research study

The data for this paper, is drawn from a major study (Naidoo et al. 2018a; Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou and Langat 2018b; Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou, Cunneen, Langat and Bolger 2015) undertaken in Australia through a cross-institutional partnership which sought to understand the school-university pathways for the support and participation of refugee students in higher education. Three universities located in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory participated in the study. The multi-sited case study of the four universities were located in a region characterised by relatively high levels of migrant and refugee settlement, social displacement, and economic disadvantage. Young people, particularly those of refugee background make up extremely small numbers in higher education. Concerned about increasing the enrolment of students from low SES backgrounds and particularly those of refugee background, the universities involved in the research are now making student participation and engagement a pivotal element in the mission statement. Our research into the factors that enable and disable refugee student access to participation in higher education which also led to a book publication, involved audiotaped individual and focus group semi-structured interviews with participants (university students of refugee background, university teaching staff, university support staff,

school teachers, school students and school support staff). Pseudonyms were assigned to informants to protect their identity.

This paper specifically foregrounds the stories of four university students of refugee backgrounds. The hour-long interviews with the students which were tape recorded highlighted 'a confessional mode of discourse and had its goal as the revelation of private experience' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997, 310). Data analysis was a recursive process that occurred simultaneously with data collection. The stories were transcribed and interpreted and themes identified in an attempt to give meaning to that being expressed by the narrator. The research team engaged in peer review to minimise the potential for interpretive difference of text by the writer and reader. Research participants were consulted about the accuracy of the data and interpretation. The stories were analysed using interpretive and thematic analysis.

The four stories thus serve as illustrations of the diverse pre-settlement experiences of students of refugee backgrounds and provide a useful context for this paper's discussion of the enabling and disabling factors in the educational aspirations of refugees. The stories are a 'powerful way we connect with a diverse world' (hooks 2010, 53). Focusing on a small and discrete group located in a specific space and time means that although the stories offer insights into the social world beyond this group of four students of refugee background, it will not be possible to identify causal relationships or generalise the findings to the broader population (Patton 2002). While the four refugee-background students' narratives may indicate that they are similar in escaping persecution, possessing multilingual capabilities, their inexperience with English literacy and prolonged schooling experiences in a refugee camp, we cannot assume that the cohort is homogenous. Sometimes even refugees from the same country may have very dissimilar educational requirements based on their varied prior life histories and life trajectories. At the same time, their struggle to cope in an academic arena prevents them from having a legitimate voice and by reflecting on their narratives, this paper thus becomes a platform for their voices to be heard.

> Voicing the journey can legitimate the identity and experience of exile. This makes it potentially easier to occupy a 'space' within the host population as well as in the public domain. A point of view can be offered which includes, beside their trauma and suffering, their active rather than passive stance and the resourcefulness, motivation and commitment that was needed in order to escape from their homelands and gain sanctuary. (BenEzer and Zetter 2015, 304)

The articulation of the narratives therefore may help reframe refugee populations to host states not as a burden but a resource. For the individual refugee, the focus on journey and narrative means the chance of retelling their life experiences in a manner that foregrounds agency rather than victimhood or charity (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 41). Narratives feature in this research as it is through the detailed recounting of life journeys that the complexities of life as a refugee are most forcefully borne. Most if not all narratives by the four students in this paper highlight life experiences ranging from losing their homes, to spending extended periods living in refugee camps and in transit countries and finally to adjusting to the integration demands in the resettlement country. These narratives are highlighted not because they are 'typical' of this group of students in any particular way, but in order to foreground the heterogeneity of this cohort and the complexity of factors that intersect in

shaping the ways in which students experience their tertiary education (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 99). They have different life experiences, skills, education, culture and religious beliefs, as well as different social and economic expectations (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 46). By navigating their individual complex histories, we do not mean to traumatise the students of refugee background, but instead, we use the stories to celebrate their endurance, hope and resilience and the fact that they are still with us (Uptin, Wright, and Harwood 2016, 599).

Stories of refugee background students

Sumitra's story

This section commences with the voice of Sumitra who was born in Bhutan and who became a refugee in Nepal. Sumitra says 'the standard of education in Nepal was high but there was very limited subject choice'. While English was regularly used as a language in Nepal, both for instruction and in textbooks, it was always translated for the students. When Sumitra arrived in Australia, she found access to information about Australian universities difficult due to her non-English speaking background and had to rely on her ESL teacher and school counsellor for support. Sumitra applied for and received a scholarship worth $5000 from the university. Even though she wished to become involved in medical research, she enrolled in a nursing course because she felt it would be easier to find a job when she graduated.

Sumitra thought that the 'support staff at university should check more regularly on how individual students from refugee backgrounds are progressing and whether they needed additional support'. In her experience, people with a limited command of English hesitate to speak in class. As a result, Sumitra believes, they miss crucial information because of their English comprehension skills. A pressing issue for Sumitra however is that of being labelled a refugee. She says she doesn't want to be perceived as having achieved what she has because she was given special consideration as a refugee but acknowledges that not everyone from a refugee background has the same life journey and their experiences with education may be quite different.

Sanjay's story

Sanjay and his family, like Sumitra, are Bhutanese but lived as refugees in Nepal for 17 years before coming to Australia. He studied to Year 10 level in a UNHCR school in Nepal and completed Years 11 and 12 in Australia. While he felt that his skills in the English language remained a challenge for him, Sanjay believed that having his schooling through the medium of English while in Nepal was an advantage for him. Upon his arrival in Australia, Sanjay enrolled in an intensive English course at TAFE and began Year 11 at a local high school in 2010. He said the intensive English course was helpful because his challenges with the English language made it difficult for him to study subjects with an emphasis on process and content. Sanjay felt that he was given much more support in high school compared to university. If unsure about his response to an assignment task, Sanjay could take the work to a teacher at high school and ask them to read through and offer feedback. He said this had not been possible at university because helping

individual students could be seen as giving them an unfair advantage. Sanjay indicated that he often relied on his friends for assistance with assignments.

When asked to evaluate his first year at university, Sanjay claimed that he had difficulty accessing the internet and this made e-study challenging. He commented that paying for internet access was a financial challenge for some students. Sanjay had hoped to secure employment on completion of his degree in his field (radiology) and work for a few years before embarking on further study, perhaps even completing a master's degree. Sanjay believed that having a supportive teacher in English language usage at university would be very helpful for students from refugee backgrounds, particularly for those having additional challenges with accents and grammar. He recommended that academic staff provide students with exemplars and scaffolds when setting assessments for students.

Biar's story

Biar was born in South Sudan, and at the age of nine fled due to civil war to a Ugandan refugee camp with his parents. At the camp, he received some basic education before moving with his family to Kenya, where he remained for a further four years and received the Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education. He was able to read and write in English at a fairly basic level because all speech and instruction was in his mother tongue Dinka. Biar indicated that this was a difficult experience mainly due to limited resources. He gave the example of having had one book shared between four students. When he arrived in Australia, Biar spent three months in an intensive English course at TAFE and then attended high school. He enrolled in a Bachelor of Medical Radiation Science at university. He experienced a number of problems at university both personally and educationally. Biar was diagnosed with depression, which he felt was largely due to his new life style at university which included the increased consumption of alcohol and admitted that this, along with language difficulties and a high workload, meant he was not coping well at university. He felt the university could have supported him better as a student through financial assistance and fostering compassionate student-lecturer relationships.

Biar confessed that while he often needed help with his study, he would never want anyone to feel sorry for him, particularly because of his refugee background. He felt that granting extensions for his assignments was a great way to assist a student of his background because processing the information took longer due to the difficulties with the English language and his limited experience with computers. Biar maintained that some lecturers, when asked to assist with lecture content would simply tell him 'to read the lecture notes'. He felt that the provision of a peer mentor with a background in his subject, who supported refugee background students, would have been an asset to his studies.

Diak's story

Diak, a Sudanese man, had been in a refugee camp in Kenya for about 16 years before coming to Australia. In the camp, he finished primary school and then began high school through UNESCO supported schooling. Diak said that the instruction was mainly in Swahili, and the study and use of English was largely the responsibility of the individual student. Diak came to Australia in 2008 at age 22 and enrolled in an intensive

English programme. To support his study in Australia as well as his family back in the camp, Diak began working in a post office, sorting out mail. In 2010 he was able to bring his wife and children to Australia. Diak encouraged his son to work hard, to become proficient in English and to do well in his studies so that he could have a good career. Diak revealed that he always wanted to work in public health and was largely motivated by the poor health he saw in his country during the war.

While Diak knew about 19 languages from his time in the camps, he said that learning English was very difficult because it had so many rules and repertoires that were discipline specific. Diak admitted that using computers and working with the learning materials was challenging for him. He also acknowledged that understanding lectures in English and writing notes simultaneously was very difficult and he hoped that lecture notes would be consistently provided by staff. He also admitted that accessing information and writing a report using technology was a very real challenge, particularly for those students with limited computing skills. He expressed concern about the lack of practical knowledge or job experience offered for post-school studies and this was a major issue for him. Diak said it was particularly important for students to have refugee background role models, people who had done well in their studies and had found suitable course-related employment.

Challenges and enablers in higher education

It is clear from the narratives of the four university students that though their journeys to Australia were unique, their experiences in the Australian higher education system were quite similar. Changes have taken place in higher education policy and practice to accommodate linguistically and culturally diverse learners in Australia, but this support as mentioned earlier in the paper, has sadly amounted to a 'one size fits all' approach that ignores important and unique differences between student cohorts.

Financial

It was apparent from the narratives that basic education in the refugee camps was poorly resourced. Those who succeeded did so through scholarships and special awards but one would imagine that these financial supports would have been challenging to access. It is obvious too that secondary education was not easily available and if access was granted, it came with many sacrifices having to be made by the students. Sadly, students from refugee backgrounds at university as a result of financial constraints have to take on additional external work to make ends meet. Ramsay and Baker (2019) believe that:

> overlooking the human cost of forgoing access to higher education may have significantly detrimental long term implications that should be factored in to asylum and refugee [my emphasis] policy and planning. (72)

For example, Diak worked, supported his family and still studied. The necessity of acquiring paid work while studying could mean that many students of refugee background are not able to continue their studies or dropout of university altogether. This draws attention to the fact that universities need to recognise that learning is increasingly taking place beyond the formal walls of a classroom. New policies need to be developed to recognise and validate both informal and non-formal learning.

Language

The lack of English language skills can also be seen to be a cause of exclusion and alienation. This is particularly relevant for the students Sumitra, Sanjay, Biar and Diak. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2016) states that 40% of the global population does not access education in a language they understand. The policy paper, 'If you don't understand, how can you learn?' (UNESCO 2016) claims that being taught in a language other than their own can negatively impact learning, especially for those students from marginalised communities. Lack of access, equality in educational opportunity and transition in higher education are all linked to the language of instruction. For example, Sumitra said that in her experience, people with a limited command of English hesitated to participate in class. This was supported in the work of Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham (2010) who identified English as a form of acculturation difficulty impacting many aspects of refugee background students' lives. Cognitive access is denied because of the language of instruction and the language of communication. Basic information about university is inaccessible for a non-English speaker. This was confirmed by Sanjay who indicated that having a supportive teacher in the area of English language at university would be very helpful for students from refugee backgrounds, particularly to help with accent difficulties and the use of appropriate vocabulary.

This, of course, points to the emphasis on English language and writing as a form of student assessment. This is hugely problematic as Western educational systems like Australia, preserve a colonising knowledge system, with its obvious inconsistencies and inequities in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, gender, and class (Dei 2008). As a result, Diak's experience at university left him feeling alienated as he realised that his prior knowledge and experience were irrelevant. Knowledge creation is a dynamic process and is continuously interpreted, through the interactions of staff and students in the classroom. More importantly, however, is that the re-interpretation should include the prior life experiences and considerations brought to the classroom from those students on the margins of society.

It is evident that when the language of instruction is not a language that a student is familiar with, then it becomes a barrier to learning. It is equally clear that the narratives show a sense of frustration with a higher education system that does not acknowledge the disjuncture between their mission statements and policies and actual practice in the lecture room. The difficulties expressed by the students in the narratives demonstrate the complex nature of the transition process. Firstly, although all the students were of refugee backgrounds, they had different prior life experiences and arrived from dissimilar demographic regions of the world. They can therefore not be treated as a homogenous group. Secondly, the students showed a heavy reliance on career information provided by their high schools which was not easily accessible at the university level, thereby exposing a huge gap in school-university partnerships to facilitate access and participation in tertiary education (Brady and Allingham 2007). This is confirmed by Sumitra when she said in the interview that [while] it was helpful to have people from the universities visit her high school to talk about career options, it would have been even more helpful to have had a strong presence of students enrolled in the actual careers at these meetings. This sentiment was echoed by Diak who felt that that the university needed to organise meetings for refugee-background students where there was an opportunity to meet and

talk to other students who were successful in their studies. Diak believed this could motivate refugee background youth at university to persevere and complete their studies knowing there was hope in finding employment.

The four narratives also show how refugee-background students identify, access and select academic supports at university and how this impacts on their academic success. It becomes vital therefore for universities to understand their student constituents and their [students'] unique and particular requirements. An analysis of the four narratives shows that family are influential in guiding individual aspirations even when material resources are limited. Luster et al. (2009) assert that 'maintaining attachment with caring and supportive people, such as family members, mentors, neighbours and people in the community helps refugee-background students to cope successfully'. Moreover, the fact that some chose degree courses that would ultimately lead to their chosen profession reveals a level of agency that developed through a process of rational reflection. Sumitra was able to convert available resources [refugee scholarship for women] to prepare herself to achieve her dream and yet she, like the other students, did not feel they could make a meaningful contribution to class discussions for fear they would be ostracised. Academic staff, in the narratives, were framed as powerful members of the university, who led busy lives and should not be disturbed; subsequently silencing these students. A big challenge for universities however is to transition refugee youth into employment. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on knowing how to use the tools for traversing the world of work. This requires university policies and programmes to go beyond just the acquisition of academic knowledge to an investigation of the aspirations of refugee youth in particular so that career competencies can be developed.

Socialisation

Finally, there was evidence in the narratives that students were unfamiliar with the university environment and hence socially isolated in many instances. The four refugee-background students expressed feelings of not fitting in and not experiencing a sense of belonging at university. A possible reason for the lack of social networking could be due to financial constraints and the need to work long hours in casual or part-time employment therefore being more off campus than on campus. Interestingly, Biar felt the need to consume alcohol in order to be sociable and to 'fit in'. The exclusionary cultural practices of the universities are clearly unjust and can be seen as an argument for moving beyond the acquisition of academic knowledge to equality of opportunity for all students in higher education. The four refugee-background students enrolled at university came from prior life contexts that were resource-deprived with few tools to prepare them for academic life. They were forced to work to support their studies and the cultural resources that they brought with them were devalued at university. This made them particularly susceptible to marginalisation and alienation with 'feelings of being isolated and stereotyped as inferior beings' (Onsando and Billett 2009, 84).

Locks et al. (2008) found that positive diverse interactions increase students' sense of belonging on campuses. On the other hand, interactions that result in feelings of social anxiety and fear decrease a sense of belonging. Additionally, two of the four student narratives referred to a fear of stereotype threat. An important issue for Sumitra is 'that of being labelled as a refugee' and similarly, Diak was disillusioned when he 'heard that a

high level of refugee students did not get work'. As Diak recommended, positive role models, who perform well in fields that typically invoke stereotype threat, can increase otherwise poor performance for stigmatised groups like refugees. University staff can increase inclusivity in their classrooms by eliminating stereotype threat.

Conclusion

Refugee background students have been an invisible group at policy level with their distinct learning profiles homogenised under 'a one size fits all' approach (Naidoo et al. 2015, 9). Detailed knowledge of the particular histories and educational trajectories of individual refugee-background students which are themselves always inflected by larger contexts are required to give insights into qualities of resilience in students from refugee backgrounds (Mupenzi, Naidoo and Gannon 2019, 47). Effective pathways, programmes and transition strategies, 'should not be isolated or piecemeal, rather, they need to be part of a carefully thought-out and planned, long-term' approach (Naidoo et al. 2018a, 84). However, these initiatives are contingent on nuanced understandings of the experiences of refugee-background students in order to respond to their particular acculturation and educational achievement barriers (Mupenzi, Naidoo and Gannon 2019, 47). In refugee studies, narratives which remain unusual in this field (Student, Kendall, and Day 2017), can provide these insights.

Tibbitts, called on practitioners in a rights-based model to 're-examine their practice so that the field can be further professionalized and linked with effective change strategies' (Tibbits 2002, 161). She proposed three typologies – *Transformational*, targets vulnerable populations and is associated with transformative and emancipatory learning, *Values and Awareness encourages* the agency of the learner and empowerment to take action to reduce human rights violations and *Accountability* applies to academics in this case and incorporates critical reflection on one's own work and capacity development in relation to the application of human rights norms applies to academics (Tibbitts 2002). So, if the university is truly committed to human rights, diversity and social cohesion, then in a rights-based model, linguistic diversity needs to be celebrated and not seen as a threat to the fabric of university life. There needs to be more support of students from non-English contexts if universities aim to facilitate understanding and enable greater participation of all students in the learning process. More importantly, an enabling and positive environment for equity, access, and participation facilitates and nurtures a sense of belonging and realisation of rights in the culturally diverse student cohort at universities. A strong regulatory framework for universities, based on the principle of human rights and widening participation, will provide the foundation for the creation of new policies and programmes in support of the disadvantaged, in particular, the students from refugee backgrounds. Policies that alienate and exclude students from the culture of the university are a perfect example of human rights defilement and exclusion from the full privileges of citizenship. Freire (2004, 19), claims that one of the greatest impediment to critical consciousness is:

> the power of neoliberal ideology, whose perverse ethic is founded on the laws of the market' rather than any genuine commitment to democratic practices.

Many educators, he maintains have succumbed to:

> the fatalism, pessimism and program of neoliberal doctrines which reduce educational practices to the technical-scientific training of learners, rather than authentic education. (Freire 2004, 19)

Changes at the university level have therefore been jagged and 'consequently, students who are the intended recipients of equitable or socially inclusive practice suffer, at best, disregard for their differentiated autonomy and at worst, humiliation' (Stirling and McGloin 2015, 15). It is not just the provision of support and resources that is important for the participation of refugee background students in higher education but

> the way in which the major social institutions fit together into one system, and how they assign fundamental rights and duties and shape the division of advantages that arise through social cooperation. (Rawls 1996, 258)

In a similar vein, Gale et al. see higher education equity programmes as being 'invested within an equity practitioner model' and executed within the equity unit itself (2010, 13). Herein lies the problem: equity units may or may not be connecting with other parts of the university so it is important to establish understandings of human rights education and equity within the university departments if change is to take place. If universities are truly committed to recruiting and enrolling low SES students like those of refugee background, then they have a responsibility according to rights-based education to support those students both academically and socially. These efforts, however, go beyond literacy support and involve changing the campus ethos to one of inter-culturality and socioeconomic inclusivity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Loshini Naidoo, Associate Professor, has an established reputation in the area of refugee education. Her areas of interest include equity and access, transition and aspirations of refugee, migrant and low SES students in Greater Western Sydney, school-university-community partnerships and language and literacy development. She was the recipient of numerous national and international teaching awards for her outstanding contribution to student learning. She has led several externally funded competitive grants, and publishes extensively in journals and books to address the significant questions of our time. Through her deep engagement with the refugee communities in Greater Western Sydney, she continues her social justice work in the conduct of educational research on communities affected by forced migration.

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