Classrooms of Possibility

Working with students from refugee backgrounds in mainstream classes

NSW GOVERNMENT

UTS — UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

Contents

1. Executive summary

This report presents outcomes from the *Classrooms of Possibility: Working with students from refugee backgrounds in mainstream classes* research project that addressed the nature of teaching and learning practices within mainstream classes with significant numbers of students from refugee backgrounds in NSW schools. The project was underpinned by the assumption that equitable education for all students, including those from refugee backgrounds, requires access to high quality curricula. A key aim of the project therefore was to contribute to understandings of the design and implementation of programs that challenge refugee students intellectually, while also meeting their learning needs within the contexts of mainstream schooling. In line with this aim, the research addressed the following questions:

- How realistic is it to expect students with possible substantial educational gaps and low levels of literacy to participate in programs that are characterised by **high intellectual challenge?**
- How can teachers provide **the differential levels of support** necessary for students with very different educational levels and abilities to engage with this intellectual challenge?
- What might all this **look like in practice?**

The research consisted of a collaborative educational intervention where researchers and teachers worked together to plan, implement and document programs. Schools and teachers were invited to participate on the grounds that there were already 'good things' happening in their programs. The research thus deliberately built on what were already good programs, with the aim of further investigating and documenting exemplars of good practice. Researchers and teachers in two high schools and two primary schools participated in cycles of professional input; program design and implementation in schools; data collection and analysis. Key sources of data included interviews with school executives, teachers, and students; and video recordings of sequences of lessons.

In addition to informing key findings presented in this report, analysis of data has provided the basis for development of a series of videos designed to provide professional support for other teachers working with refugee background students in mainstream classes.

Major outcomes from the research

A number of key factors were identified in the research as contributing to high quality learning environments for students of refugee backgrounds in mainstream classes. While not uniquely relevant to the education of students of refugee background, the research findings indicate that, together, these factors contribute to learning environments that provide high challenge curriculum programs for refugee background students, while also providing the high levels of support necessary to enable students to engage with a high quality school curriculum and to achieve academic success. These factors include:

- Positive, supportive and predictable school and class learning environments;
- School structures that support processes of collaborative program planning between EAL/D and class/ subject teachers;
- Clarifying purposes for learning and sharing these purposes with students;
- Planning and implementing high challenge programs;
- Planning and implementing high support programs;
- Providing students with opportunities and support to 'talk to learn' and to 'learn to talk' (and read and write) academic English.

Recommendations from the research

Recommendation 1

High quality learning environments for refugee background students in mainstream classes

That schools and teachers build on findings from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research to meet the needs of their refugee background students in mainstream classes by addressing the following factors in their processes of program planning and teaching:

Positive learning environments that are characterised by:

- supportive environments at both school and classroom levels, where students and their families feel welcomed, valued and safe; and where high priority is attached to students' wellbeing;
- supportive and respectful relationships with teacher(s) and other students;
- predictable learning environments that include reinforcement of clear routines within lessons, and firm and consistent classroom management;
- consistent, positive feedback to students on values and behaviour and also on their progress in learning; (ie reinforcement of how to 'do class/ school' and of how to be a 'successful' student).

Collaborative program planning where:

- school structures facilitate and enable collaborative planning over periods of time, with particular emphasis on:
  - sharing relevant information about students to assist all teachers to know their students;
  - time for class/ subject and EAL/D teachers to meet and work collaboratively;
  - opportunities for EAL/D teachers to take an active role in the collaborative planning process;
- clear guidelines for program planning facilitate:
  - analysis of students' strengths and needs, and analysis of curriculum demands;
  - clarification of learning goals (of units and lessons);
  - planning for high challenge and high support;
  - opportunities for teacher reflection, and evaluation of effectiveness of programs.

Programs with **clear purposes for learning** that are shared with students, and where teachers:

- clarify for themselves the purposes for students' learning at the level of Units and lessons;
- articulate Learning Goals during the process of planning Units and lessons, and then share these Goals (and Success Criteria) with students;
- discuss with students the purposes of individual tasks, and link these to purposes of Unit and lesson;
- reflect with students on what they have learned and how this learning relates to broader purposes of units and programs.

High challenge programs, where teachers:

- maintain high expectations of all students, including those from refugee backgrounds;

- design programs that:
  - ask serious questions about the purposes and significance of studying specific curriculum subjects such as History, Science, Geography;
  - build students' understanding of key curriculum concepts in relation to their understanding of the purposes of the subject, and the purposes of specific units of work;
  - require students to use their developing field knowledge to think like geographers, or scientists or historians, and then require students to transform that knowledge in order to complete cognitively challenging tasks;
  - sequence tasks in ways that acknowledge students' current understandings, but that aim beyond this – and that encourage students to question, analyse and think critically about what they are learning.

High support programs, where teachers:

- recognise where students 'are at' in terms of their current knowledge and English language proficiency, and build programs from there;
- select and sequence tasks to 'design-in' high levels of support and enable students gradually to build understanding of curriculum language, concepts and skills;
- include purposeful shifts between whole class and group activities so that different levels of support can be provided to specific students as needed;
- ensure students have access to message abundancy through opportunities to visit and revisit similar curriculum language and concepts via whole class, group, and pair work;
- sequence tasks to build in handover so students became increasingly independent as learners;
- provide contingent support at the point of need in order to make the most of the 'teachable moment';
- provide clear and explicit task instructions, and check students' understanding;
- provide ongoing support for language and literacy development, including support for specialised vocabulary development, that is embedded within curriculum programs.

Programs where students have opportunities **to talk to learn and to learn to talk** (and read and write) academic English, and where teachers:

- design-in opportunities within programs for students to talk for different purposes, including
  - to review and build cumulatively on prior learning;
  - to visit and revisit key concepts and language;
  - to explore and hypothesise, to clarify thinking, and to extend understandings
  - to summarise, generalise and transform knowledge;
  - to prepare for academic writing;
- introduce students to subject specific academic language through modelling and through opportunities to begin using the language;
- embed the explicit teaching of academic English in all subject areas by:
  - identifying program goals to address aspects of language and literacy relevant to curriculum content;
  - identifying spoken and written texts relevant to curriculum content within programs, and explicit teaching of language features relevant to those texts, including text organisation and structure, sentence grammar, spelling and punctuation;
  - teaching of subject specific vocabulary.

Recommendation 2

Questions to guide program planning and reflection

That, when planning and implementing programs for refugee background students in mainstream classes, teachers work with the *Questions to guide program planning and reflection* that are provided in Appendix B of this report.

Recommendation 3

Professional learning and support for teachers

That schools provide mainstream teachers with access to professional learning and support to assist them understand and meet the specific need of their refugee background students within mainstream classes. As part of this professional learning and support, schools work with videos and professional learning resources developed from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research project.

2. Background to the research

Purpose of the research project

This document reports on outcomes from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research project that addressed the nature of teaching and learning practices within mainstream classes with significant numbers of students of refugee backgrounds. The project built directly on findings from previous NSW Department of Education funded research, that had investigated the transition of adolescent students from refugee backgrounds between Intensive English Centres (IECs) and mainstream high schools (Hammond, 2014a; 2015). The focus of the previous research was the nature of pedagogical practices experienced by students both in the IECs and in mainstream high schools. That research found that both IECs and high schools provided students with welcoming and supportive learning environments; and that the schools had in place a variety of programs that provided valuable support for their refugee students. These included:

- programs to assist with early stages of students' transition to high school;
- programs to support students' ongoing welfare;
- programs to support students' academic study.

However, the project also identified some areas where teaching and learning practices could be further strengthened. Specifically, it recommended the need for more emphasis on:

- systemic designing-in of scaffolding and 'message abundancy'
- systematic and explicit teaching of language and literacy across the curriculum
- consistent and explicit discussion of purposes and significance of learning
- 'unpacking' of assessment tasks

The aim of this follow-up *Classrooms of Possibility* project was to work with teachers of mainstream classes in a small number of schools to build on the previous findings and explore implementation of the recommendations. As with the earlier research, and in line with evidence-based practices (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2014, p5), this project was underpinned by the assumption that equitable education for all students, including those from refugee backgrounds, requires access to the full school curriculum - and that an alternative curriculum does not treat students equitably. It is thus 'better to set the same high expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations' (ACARA, 2009:8).

Building on this assumption, the project addressed the following research questions:

- How realistic is it to expect students with possible substantial educational gaps and low levels of literacy to participate in programs that are characterised by **high intellectual challenge?**
- How can teachers provide **the differential levels of support** necessary for students with very different educational levels and abilities to engage with this intellectual challenge?
- What might all this **look like in practice?**

The relevance of the project

Australia is currently resettling a significant number of refugee students from Syria and Iraq, while also continuing its intake from other areas. This means that overall refugee students arriving in Australia will continue to be diverse, not only in their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but also in their prior educational experiences. Many students from refugee backgrounds, in addition to experiencing major trauma in their lives, will have had little, no,

or disrupted access to formal education, and limited opportunities to develop literacy in any language. For all students from refugee backgrounds, adjusting to schooling in Australia presents enormous challenges. They deal with the consequences of prior trauma and the possible loss of family and friends; they also face major intercultural and interpersonal adjustments associated with settling in Australia; they are likely to be experiencing economic hardship and high levels of uncertainty in regard to their own and their families' futures. In addition to all this, they face major educational challenges as they attempt to learn oral modes of English while at the same time engaging with educational curriculum content in English. Further, some students are attempting to learn initial concepts about literacy in English, while trying to use their knowledge of literacy for learning (Hammond & Miller, 2015).

While in recent years the social and welfare needs of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian schools have (rightly) received attention (Vickers, 2007; Matthews, 2008, Gibbs, 2014), overall there has been less emphasis in research on the teaching and learning practices that engage and support these students in mainstream schooling. The prior provision of supportive and positive learning environments where students feel safe and valued is, of course, essential for any constructive learning to take place (Cranitch, 2010). However, if we are to support students to achieve educational success, it is important to build on this understanding, to focus on students' educational progress and on teaching and learning practices (Dooley, 2009; Naidoo, 2011; Miller, Windle & Yazdanpanah, 2014; Hammond, 2015). An overall aim of the *Classrooms of Possibility* project was to contribute to understandings of the design and implementation of programs that challenge refugee students intellectually, while also meeting their learning needs within the contexts of mainstream schooling.

A finding from the earlier research was that while many of the observed lessons provided students of refugee backgrounds with access to challenging curriculum content, the lessons were less consistent when it came to ensuring students were able to understand and engage at a deep level with that content. A key issue here was the conflicting pressure experienced by teachers, especially in high schools, to 'get through' mandatory curriculum content, while also attempting to ensure all students were able to understand and engage deeply with that content. Interviews with high school teachers confirmed that this conflict was exacerbated when their classes included refugee students who may have experienced minimal or disrupted schooling prior to coming to Australia. While there are no easy solutions to this dilemma, outcomes from the earlier research suggested specific ways in which teaching and learning practices in mainstream classes could be refined to better support refugee students. Based on these outcomes, the *Classrooms of Possibility* project engaged mainstream and EAL/D teachers in a designed intervention that aimed to assist them address the dilemma of ensuring students had access to a high challenge mainstream curriculum, while also building in appropriate levels of high support for all their students, including students of refugee background.

3. The research

Overall purpose of the research

As indicated, an overall aim of the *Classrooms of Possibility* research was to build on outcomes from the previous project: *The Transition of Refugee Students from Intensive English Centres to Mainstream High Schools: Current practices and future possibilities.* A major purpose, therefore, was to design and implement a collaborative educational intervention in mainstream classes that included students from a refugee background. The research was located in a small number of schools where the student population was characterised by high proportions of students from language backgrounds other than English, including significant numbers of students from refugee backgrounds. It involved collaboration between researchers and teachers in cycles of professional input that addressed outcomes from previous research; program design and implementation in schools; data collection and analysis; feedback to the research team; followed by further implementation, documentation and analysis of data. While the previous project focused on refugee background students making the transition between IECs and high schools, this project focused on teachers and refugee background students in mainstream classes - and hence on programs designed for students who are post new-arrivals, and beyond the very initial stages of learning English. It included primary as well as high schools – thus addressing teaching and learning practices in years 4 to 10.

Location of research

The research took place in two primary and two high schools. Selection of research schools was undertaken in collaboration with Jane Wallace, Refugee Student Programs Advisor, NSW Department of Education. Schools were invited to participate on the grounds that, in addition to student populations with significant numbers of students of refugee background, there were already 'good things' happening in the classes. The research thus deliberately built on what were already good programs, with the aim of documenting exemplars of good practice.

Two teachers from each selected school who were working with students in years 5 to 9 participated in research. These were class/ subject teachers and collaborating EAL/D teachers, who worked closely together. In addition, executive staff from each school were invited to attend professional input sessions, to be involved with teachers in program design and planning, and to support teachers in their program implementation. For logistical reasons, the research focused on teaching and learning practices within the core curriculum areas of English, Science and History/ Geography.

The research design

The research itself was based on a designed intervention that was implemented in two phases.

Phase 1: included two days of professional input at the beginning of the research, collaborative program planning between researchers and teachers, implementation of programs, data collection and analysis and feedback to the whole research team. The professional input days addressed outcomes of previous research, as well as other relevant research findings. They also addressed the nature and theoretical underpinning of key principles of high challenge and high support in EAL pedagogy – principles that were fundamental to the research. Teachers and researchers then worked together to plan and fine-tune programs that were designed to address the needs of students of refugee background within mainstream classes. While

teachers taught the programs, researchers observed and documented 3 lessons in each school; researchers then undertook analysis of data; and provided feedback on findings to the whole research team.

The major source of data collection in Phase 1 was the observation and recording of sequences of three lessons in each of the research classrooms. These enabled documentation of the impact of the earlier professional input and provided the basis for feedback to participating teachers at the end of Phase 1. Copies of key teaching resources and samples of students' work supported this documentation. Data collection in phase 1 also included interviews with participating executive staff, participating teachers, and focus group interviews with selected students of refugee background. To complement these sources of data, professional input sessions and collaborative planning sessions were also videoed.

Phase 2: included a second round of collaborative planning and then implementation of programs that had been refined and strengthened on the basis of feedback from Phase 1. Data collection in Phase 2 consisted primarily of the videoing of 3 lessons from these programs in each of the four schools. The aim here was to capture the nature and effectiveness of programs in the four schools, and the ways in which refugee students were supported to participate within mainstream classes. The videos enabled the research team to focus on the overall design of the programs, as well as specific teaching and learning practices. Additional sources of data in Phase 2 included interviews with teachers and students, videoing of collaborative planning meetings, and videoing of professional input sessions. Professional film-makers were employed in phase 2 to enable the research team to develop resources that could be used in the future for professional development in other schools and with other teachers.

In sum, the research consisted of the following:

Phase 1:	Two days of professional input and planning for the research

Collaborative program planning (researchers and teachers)

Interviews with participating executive staff and teachers

Videoing of three lessons in each participating school

Interviews with focus students

Two days of professional input and feedback to teachers and schools

Phase 2	Collaborative program planning (researchers and teachers)

Professional videoing of three lessons in each participating school

Final interviews with participating teachers

Final interviews with focus students

One day of professional input and feedback to teachers.

The nature of the intervention and collaboration

A feature of the research was its' deliberately interventionist nature. We wanted to explore recommendations from the previous research and their implications for classroom practice. As indicated above, the research team met for a total of five professional input days during the project, and also for collaborative program planning sessions within each of the four research schools. The professional input days were organised as follows:

Content of professional input days

Days 1 and 2 (beginning of the research)	Introduction to the project: purpose and design; ethics requirements Current context for refugees in Australia Principles of EAL pedagogy that underpinned the research • Findings from previous research • Principles of high challenge and high support • Quality Teaching and EAL pedagogy • Assessment for differentiation Implications for current and future education of students from refugee backgrounds in mainstream classes Program planning and reflection • working with 'tools' of high challenge and high support
Days 3 and 4 (between Phases 1 and 2 of research)	Feedback to each school based on analysis of programs from Phase 1 of the research: • contextualising of program • designed-in and contingent scaffolding • 'doing school' • 'talking to learn' • focusing on academic English Explicit knowledge of language and literacy: • incorporating language and literacy in cross-curriculum programs • language teaching and assessment Planning for Phase 2 of the research
Day 5 (end of research)	Final feedback, based on analysis of programs in each school from Phase 2 of the research • implementing high challenge, high support programs • clarifying purposes for learning • 'slow' learning; talking to learn and learning to talk; • unpacking assessment tasks Reflecting on outcomes of the research

Processes used to analyse data

Interviews were analysed in line with procedures for content analysis. Lessons were initially transcribed and then summaries from the transcriptions were developed from each interview. These summaries provided the basis for identification of major and recurring themes. These themes have informed the discussion of interview findings in Section 3 of this report. In addition, during the content analysis, sections of interviews were identified as suitable for inclusion in future professional development videos.

Lessons were analysed both descriptively and systematically.

As indicated, video recordings from phase 2 were professionally recorded and edited. These video recordings have enabled the researchers to work towards producing a resource for use in future professional development programs to demonstrate key ways in which teachers both challenged and supported their refugee students in mainstream classes. Descriptive analysis involved two researchers identifying relevant sections from lessons to include in these future professional development videos.

Lessons were also analysed in line with a system for analysis developed in the previous research (Hammond, 2014a). In brief, this system drew on outcomes from earlier research that Hammond & her colleagues had undertaken into EAL pedagogy (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Gibbons, 2008; Hammond, 2014b,). It also drew on Dimensions and selected Elements within the NSW Quality Teaching Model (NSW DET, 2003). As with the previous project, our system of analysis included pedagogical features from earlier research in EAL pedagogy, and selected Elements from the NSW Quality Teaching Model, that were identified as especially significant for EAL/D students. Lessons were analysed in relation to the Dimensions and Elements that are shown below. (For further details of the theoretical and pedagogical basis for this system, see Hammond, 2014a).

Dimensions and Elements used in analysis of lessons

	Intellectual Quality	Quality Learning Environment	Significance
Selected Elements from NSW Quality Teaching Model	Deep Knowledge; Deep Understanding; Substantive Communication.	Engagement; High Expectations; Social Support.	Background Knowledge; Cultural Knowledge; Connectedness; Inclusivity.
EAL pedagogical features (from previous research into EAL pedagogy)	Academic Language Focus.	Explicit Goals; Scaffolding.	

In order to enhance reliability of analysis, two researchers independently coded each lesson, before meeting to compare their analysis. In the event, the two researchers were very consistent in their codings; however, where there was any discrepancy in analysis, the two researchers revisited lesson transcripts and videos to review the data and reach final agreement on codings.

As indicated, these procedures were consistent with those developed in earlier research (Hammond, 2014a), and were selected in order to provide the possibility of comparing findings from the two projects.

Ethics

Ethics approval for the research was obtained from both University of Technology Sydney and NSW Department of Education. In line with approved ethical guidelines, students and parents were fully informed of the research purposes and procedures, and participation in the research was completely voluntary. Consent letters were translated into relevant languages, and information sessions were held with teachers and with students. Efforts were also made to ensure the implementation of the research made minimal disruptions to normal school routines.

The most significant ethical issue in the research resulted from the nature and purpose of the Phase 2 videos. These classroom recordings are being edited with the aim of producing a series of professional development video resources. The faces of teachers and students in these videos will therefore be recognisable. To address ethical issues arising from this issue, the following measures were taken:

- participants were assured that the identity of schools and teachers would remain confidential unless the school or teacher chose to be identified;

- the identity of students would remain confidential;

- participants were assured the videos will only be used for professional educational purposes; and that the purpose of the videos is to highlight practices 'that seem to be working well' (NSW, DoE School Research Priorities, 2014), rather than identify any weaknesses within programs.

4. Findings from analysis of interviews and lessons

The purpose of this section of the report is to present a systematic account of outcomes from the two major sources of data in the research: teacher interviews and recorded lessons. The research also involved video recording of professional input sessions, recording of collaborative program planning meetings, collection of teaching resources and collection of copies of students' written work. However, since teacher interviews and lesson recordings are regarded as the central and major sources of information for the project, this section is restricted to discussion of these two sources. The following section (Section 4) addresses more general findings from the project as a whole, and it draws from all available data.

The section begins with discussion of findings from teacher interviews. This is followed by discussion of findings from analysis of lessons.

Interviews

As indicated earlier, experienced teachers from one class in each of four schools were invited to participate in this research project. A total of 13 executive staff and teachers across the four schools were interviewed. While the total number of interviews is small, the level of experience of interviewees, and their commitment to the wellbeing of refugee background students, means that their interviews provide insights that are likely to be relevant to other teachers working with refugee background students in other schools.

Interviews were conducted in a relatively informal manner and were organised to fit with the schedules of busy people. They were semi-structured, in that they followed an interview schedule, but were conducted flexibly, and varied to some extent depending on interviewees' responses. Most interviews included two or more interviewees, and at times were conducted with executive staff and teachers together. As a result, outcomes from all interviews are discussed together (although quotes indicate whether the interviewee was an executive staff or teacher).

The numbers of interviews conducted across the schools are summarised below.

Summary of interviews

	Executive staff	Teachers	Total
Primary school 1	1 executive staff (1 interview)	2 teachers (2 interviews)	3
Primary school 2	1 executive staff (1 interview conducted with teachers)	2 teachers (2 interviews)	2
High school 1	1 executive staff (1 interview)	2 teachers (2 interviews)	3
High school 2	2 executive staff (1 interview)	2 teachers (2 interviews)	3

Interviews addressed the following areas:

For school executive staff:

- the school's experiences with refugee students; the nature of programs and resources that have been put in place to support students of refugee background;
- their views on challenges and successes in the education of students of refugee background in the school;

For class/subject and EAL/D teachers:

- their views on challenges and successes in the education of students of refugee background in the school, and their perceptions of the educational progress of students of refugee background;
- their approaches to teaching and learning practices with students of refugee background, including:
  - program planning;
  - priorities in addressing needs of students of refugee background;
  - ways of building in teaching of academic language and literacy;
- their advice to other teachers working with students of refugee background.

(See **Appendix 1** for Interview schedules for executive staff and teachers.)

Schools' experiences with students of refugee background and current levels of school support

As indicated, all schools that participated in the research had highly culturally and linguistically diverse student populations, with up to 95% from language backgrounds other than English. All schools also had significant numbers of students of refugee background (this is one of the reasons why the schools were invited to participate in the research). Major languages of these students of refugee backgrounds included Arabic, Dari, Urdu and Assyrian.

Interviewees were asked about their school's experiences with students of refugee background and the nature of school level support that they provided for these students. Their responses indicated that all schools were responsive to the diverse nature of their student populations, and to the presence and needs of their refugee background students. All schools provide an extensive range of programs to support their refugee background students as well as their other EAL/D students. These programs typically operate across the whole school and contribute significantly to the supportive nature of the learning environments that are available to students. Some programs address initial enrolment procedures to ensure that accurate information about individual students is available in the school; others are designed to include families and to ensure that families are welcomed into the school community. Some support students' ongoing academic development; while others go beyond this to engage students through links with sports, choir, dancing, music, or art. School counsellors are also available within the schools. Interviewees' descriptions of these programs are summarised in the following sub-sections.

Initial enrolment procedures and support

All schools had well-established procedures in place for initial enrolment and support of refugee background students.

In one school, for example, the families of all new students are interviewed for an hour or so by a member of the school executive. This interview gathers information about the student who is enrolling in the school, including information about their language abilities, health and previous schooling. This information enables the student to be placed initially in a year group / class with students from similar language backgrounds, and *with at least one buddy who speaks the same language* (Primary school executive). It also enables the school to assess what assistance the student may require from the EAL/D teachers, health services, counsellors, or school learning support officers (SLSOs). This initial interview also explores the support services the family are already accessing and what extra support they may be in need of, so that they can be linked with appropriate community services.

In another school, when students make the transition from Intensive English centres to high school, a team consisting of refugee coordinator, EAL/D coordinator, and learning support team work together to decide on the most appropriate placement for each student, and on the specific kinds of academic and welfare support that they need. Students' ongoing progress is monitored by this team.

Interviewees from all schools stressed the importance of systematic, careful and thorough initial enrolment procedures.

Welcoming families into the school community

All participating schools identified community engagement as a priority, and explained that once students are enrolled in the school, families are encouraged to participate in the school community. Community liaison officers employed by the school reach out to the local communities to make links with the families and communities. As one interviewee explained, in our school *the philosophy is we go to them* (ie to the families in their communities) (Primary school executive). Families are also encouraged to spend time in the schools. To facilitate this, the schools implement programs and provide structures and resources that encourage families and other community members to come to the school. One school executive explained:

> *What is different about our school is our harmony house program, the way in which it has brought people in who have not necessarily been literate in their first language let alone English.* (Primary school executive)

In this school, families are also encouraged to attend school assemblies, where important messages are regularly provided in community languages. These assemblies not only provide families with information about their children's school, they also provide opportunities for meeting other families.

Interviewees from all schools described programs that have been developed to encourage family and community participation. These included regular information programs for the families on topics such as:

- the school system, TAFE, pathways to university;
- women's health, including family planning and reproductive health;
- good parenting and discipline of children;
- the role of police in the Australian community;
- computers, mathematics;
- services offered by different agencies and community organisations.

One interviewee explained the importance of providing families with information about the Australian school system as follows:

> *All our new arrival parents in the first few weeks they'll always come to the teacher, please tell me how can I help my child? And the first thing is, oh you're meant to read with them, and then they say but where's the textbook? And we just couldn't get through that we don't use textbooks in Australia… And there's no concept of syllabus in non-Western countries where the majority of our students come from. Their syllabus is basically a textbook, and so when they come to Australia it's like 'what are you teaching from, how do you know what to teach?' I say we've got what's called a curriculum and syllabus, and it (ie providing information) stemmed from that.* (Primary school teacher)

More generally, the importance of reaching out and engaging families in the life of the school was explained as follows:

> *If you're not engaging the community, there's little point in trying to educate the children. It really is a matter of we're educating a community here because, really, in any society a school should be a focal point for a community, a common ground where everybody can come together.* (High school executive)

This view was reinforced by a number of other interviewees, for example:

> *You know that once the parents also feel safe, welcomed as well, that's going to have a very positive impact on their child too. So they do feel it's a place to come, it's a community, it's not a drop off my child and then go, so there is a role for them to play that has an important impact on learning.* (Primary school teacher)

Support for students' engagement and academic progress

All participating schools reported a range of programs that are designed to support refugee background students' academic work and more generally to engage them in schooling.

A core academic program in each of the schools is the English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) program. As these schools are located in metropolitan Sydney, students of high school age typically spend a year or so at an Intensive English Centre before enrolling in their high school, while students of primary school age are enrolled directly into the school. All participating schools have a NSW Department of Education allocation of EAL/D teachers that reflect their numbers of EAL/D students, and all schools provide EAL/D support programs that are organised to address the needs of their students.

Interviewees reported that in high schools, EAL/D support is typically provided through organisation of parallel classes, or through an EAL/D teacher team teaching with a subject teacher. In participating primary schools, students typically have access to initial specialist English as an additional language support via withdrawal groups (usually two hours each morning), and they also have further in-class EAL/D teacher support. Once students are beyond the initial stages of learning English, EAL/D support is provided within their mainstream classes. However, interviewees reported that EAL/D programs are flexible and adjusted as necessary to reflect changes in the student population and changes in students' needs. For example, one of the primary schools was trialling a parallel English as an additional language class for some students in years 5 and 6 as a way of better preparing them for high school *because the gap is so wide for them.* (Primary school teacher) One of the high schools had structured the Higher School Certificate so that students could study three subjects per year over a two-year period (instead of the usual one year period). This was explained as follows:

> *They do the preliminary work and the HSC work for those three subjects. They sit for three exams and then they come back and start three new subjects. So they still get their HSC in a two year period but it's in a much more accessible way, mode of delivery for them ... They only have three subjects to focus on at a time which is less metalanguage to be digesting, reduces their stress levels. I think it helps them to manage their time more effectively.*
> (High school executive)

Interviewees described a range of other programs within their schools that are designed to support students' wellbeing and their academic progress. These include:

- homework programs offered in high schools and organised in collaboration with universities. Here university students worked at the schools with individuals or pairs of refugee background students to help clarify key curriculum concepts and to support them in 'unpacking' and completing assessment tasks;
- community language programs where students have two hours of instruction per week in their home language during school hours;
- extra-curricular programs that support students' recovery from trauma and encourage their overall engagement with school. These include different sports, dance groups, drumming groups; playing with a band; learning musical instruments, debating club; chess clubs, and art classes;
- breakfast club to ensure students start the day with a substantial meal.

Interviewees explained that sporting programs are especially valued by many refugee-background students. Families often find it difficult to transport their children to outside sporting activities, so the school brings the sporting programs in for the students. In one high school, the refugee coordinator links a sports program with the Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) program for 2 hours per week as a way of providing additional support for students and their families.

> *So it's sport, that's the hook and then there's either a social worker or a community worker who comes in and plays soccer, in our case with the students, he gets to know them, informal counselling happens.'* (High school executive)

Support for teachers' professional development

In addition to supporting their refugee background students, schools provided support for their teachers. Interviewees described examples of this support, including:

- providing information about the linguistic and cultural background of specific groups of refugee background students;
- offering the Teaching English Language Learners (TELL) program and other professional learning for all teachers within the school;
- one school had provided a year-long professional development program for all teachers within the school that addressed ways of incorporating explicit teaching of language (including grammar) into cross-curriculum programs.

Interviewees stressed the importance of opportunities to share expertise amongst staff, especially as a way of supporting beginning or inexperienced teachers. This occurred through staff meetings, discussions during release from face to face teaching (RFF); and in mentoring programs where more experienced teachers worked closely with new teachers. As one interviewee explained, informal workplace learning was also important:

> *I think a significant amount of professional learning in EAL/D in our school happens in terms of workplace learning, so learning on the go, learning from discussing with teachers, learning from our team teaching opportunities that we have in our school.* (Primary school teacher)

Interviewees from all schools also highlighted the value of having opportunities for collaborative program planning, especially between class/subject teacher and EAL/D teacher. This emerged as an important issue with interviewees and is discussed later in the report.

Perceptions of students' strengths and challenges; areas of need of refugee background students

Interviewees were asked their views on the greatest strengths and challenges faced by students of refugee backgrounds, and their views more generally on priorities when working with these students. Not surprisingly there was considerable consensus amongst responses.

Interviewees from all schools identified students' major challenges as their life circumstances that have resulted in disrupted or minimal schooling; limited literacy development in any language; and possible past experiences of trauma and separation from family. These life circumstances however have also contributed to students' resilience and their overall positive view of life in Australia. As one interviewee explained:

> *They come to us with a greater world-view through their own experience and trauma than the vast majority of people their age who have grown up in Australia. They have seen and experienced things that are unimaginable to most of us. They've come to our country with a deep sense of genuine gratitude for all the advantages that have been brought to them for being here, particularly the advantage of education. When you're thinking about coming from Afghanistan where, under the Taliban, girls had no education at all and boys' education was very limited - particularly Hazara boys who were often excluded and their racial group was subjected to intensive genocide - there's that deep sense of gratitude.* (High school executive)

Despite their overall positive responses to life in Australia and to school in Australia, the geo-political situation means that refugee background students face on-going challenges. This is especially the case for students who have come from Islamic countries.

> *They're constantly confronted with the political situation of the world, which they are acutely aware of, the conflicts within Islam itself, the situation of watching their own country, their country of origin, being torn apart on an ongoing basis. You look at things like, many of the students we have now have actually spent most of their lives in refugee camps in appalling conditions in Pakistan and then you look at the violence that's happening in that country as well……. People talk about the rise of Islamophobia being promoted by right wing politics and right wing media and I see it. And the students here are victims of that, they're always having to look over their shoulder and worry about who's going to judge me simply because of the colour of my skin or the language I am speaking.* (High school executive)

Interviewees stressed the importance of schools as a mechanism for promoting inclusiveness - within the school itself, but also within the broader community:

> *And if I'm a Muslim and you're a Christian, why can't we celebrate each other's festivals, why can't we show solidarity as human beings and show respect to each other by doing that. So at the beginning of the year, everyone gets red*

> *packets for Lunar New Year with chocolate coins in it, we celebrate, we breakfast with our Islamic community during Ramadan, we celebrate Easter, Diwali, the major religious festivals, we make the students aware of these things. Because it may not be what you believe but your friend does believe it and you need to understand why your friend does because that strengthens your friendship. And that's something that's worked very well within the school as well. I don't like the concept of tolerance, tolerance implies I don't really agree with you but I'll put up with you. We're looking for acceptance here through understanding … we're incredibly well positioned as a public school to be able to promote that to a broader spectrum of society and to people in other contexts.* (High school executive)

In response to the geo-political challenges faced by students, a common theme amongst interviewees from all schools was the need for students to feel welcomed and safe at school.

> *I think the greatest thing with these students is just feeling safe.*
> (Primary school teacher)

> *They need to feel safe, they need to feel welcomed, they need to feel valued and they need to be cared for by nurturing teachers.* (Primary school executive)

To ensure safety and security, interviewees stressed the need to establish warm and supportive relationships with students. *Students are always greeted with a smile and made to feel comfortable* (Primary school teacher). All schools worked hard to achieve such learning environments. One interviewee described this as promoting the principle of wellbeing:

> *The principle of wellbeing ... I think that's a real strength of the school. And I see it through the students, individual students, the way that they've transformed from people who were socially confused or inept or not confident to being very confident young people, even if they may not have got the ATAR they desired. They've still learnt so much and it's important to value that as much as the ATAR.*
> (High school executive)

More generally, as this interviewee explained, *working with refugee students is embedded as part of the overall culture of the school which is underpinned by a focus on students' wellbeing.* (High school executive)

In addition to dealing with events in the world, as they engage with schooling in Australia, refugee background students are required to make major cultural adjustments. Even for students who have had access to prior schooling in countries of origin, their experiences at school and the knowledge they bring to school are likely to be very different from those of students who have grown up in Australia:

> *I think there's a challenge because even though they look fluent in Australian culture they're not really. It's a superficial sort of, they haven't got the deep academic knowledge and the deep background understanding.*
> (High school executive)

Not surprisingly, interviewees reported that students who have most difficulty are those who have had limited schooling, and who have very limited literacy in either their first language or in English. Although refugee students are generally very eager learners, some have difficulty in adjusting to the very different teaching and learning practices that they encounter in Australian schools.

> *We sort of encourage risk taking and having a go and talking even if you don't think that you've got the right answer. Whereas in Lebanon, in their countries, that was sort of… was not acceptable, they'd get in trouble …… you think, oh they're quiet because they don't know the language or they're limited in it but it's in fact because they think, oh, if I say that and it's wrong I'm going get in trouble.* (Primary school teacher)

As one teacher explained, it takes a while for them to realise learning is not just about memorising and reading/writing.

> *But once you've hooked them in that learning, once you've shown that 'we do care about you, let's just make sure that you're feeling safe', then you've got them.* (Primary school teacher)

Students initially also had difficulty understanding the purposes of lesson tasks that do not involve writing.

> *They think that's not learning: 'when am I going to write, Miss, or when am I going to write, oh we haven't written'.* (Primary school teacher)

In addition, many refugee background students have gaps in understanding of everyday school routines, and in the kind of basic educational procedures that are often taken for granted by teachers working with students who have been educated in Australia:

> *So just basic things like…you know, keeping up with your exercise book or the assessment task coming up and things like that, they really struggle with that, with the expectations and the routine. Then there's the whole lack of background knowledge, lack of previous education, just basic things.* (High school teacher)

> *I started by asking students first who had books in their house. Then out of the class of 15, three hands went up. That means 12 out of the 15 students have zero books in their home. A lot of those students have no access to the internet either so they've no access, ready access, to print, English print. Out of the students that do have books, most are in Arabic and maybe one student has one English book. That might be from, that might be a kindy book. So I started with showing students, holding the, getting the students to actually hold the book, showing them what the front cover was, the back cover, the spine. How to identify the title and the author and what a blurb is.* (High school teacher)

These gaps can present problems for mainstream teachers who are not experienced in working with refugee-background students. As one teacher explained:

> *I have to get the (subject) teacher to take a step back and ask how many of them (students) have actually been to the beach…You're talking about Cronulla and the flags, do they know what the flags are and what they mean? Do they know where Cronulla is?* (High school EAL/D teacher)

Students also have gaps in their educational knowledge. For example when discussing the Science program with year 10 students, one teacher explained:

> *When we were discussing electricity, they didn't know, either they couldn't communicate their knowledge of how electricity is made or they just had no idea of how electricity was made and was sent to their homes and their school.* (High school teacher)

To assist students to adjust to education in Australia, interviewees stressed the importance of:

- providing students with an orderly and structured school environment;
- providing students with predictable routines across the whole school, and with clear predictable structures within individual classes and lessons;
- reinforcing school and classroom routines that include:
  - settling students in their classes;
  - following predictable patterns in clearly structured lessons;
  - systematically building up background knowledge;
  - ensuring assessment tasks have been understood;
  - establishing timelines for monitoring progress and completion of assessment tasks;
  - checking homework has been completed.

> *One of the most important things is establishing a routine. And having a very structured scope and sequence up front so that they know exactly what they're doing and why. And then just following that.* (High school teacher)

> *They, they've got to feel comfortable and relaxed but sometimes that firmness establishes that safety. (*High school teacher)

Teaching and learning practices with students of refugee background

Interviews with teachers addressed their teaching and learning practices with refugee background students. Teachers were asked to describe their approaches to teaching refugee background students. They were also asked what they regarded as major priorities in the education of refugee students, and how they balanced the needs of these students with those of other students within the one class. Teachers' responses to these questions are summarised under the following headings:

- Program planning: designed-in scaffolding, and planning for Rich Tasks;
- Priorities in addressing needs of students of refugee background;
- Ways of incorporating teaching of language and literacy in cross-curriculum programs.

Program planning; designed-in scaffolding and planning for Rich Tasks

In their interviews, teachers spoke extensively about their **processes of program planning**. They emphasised the value of careful planning processes that enabled them to work with compulsory curriculum documents, but in ways that ensured they could design-in high levels of support for their students. This process began with *just knowing your students; knowing who they are, knowing how they learn* (Primary school teacher); and then reflecting on students' specific strengths and needs:

> *We have to think, wait a minute, what do the kids need to learn, what language do they need to learn and what content knowledge might there not be for the (learning).* (Primary school executive)

When working with the curriculum documents one teacher explained it was important:

> *… to spend some time just deconstructing the actual (syllabus) outcomes and looking into the suggested activities and things like that before we produced a whole big picture for ourselves and what we wanted. And we did apply the backward mapping strategy thinking this is the outcome, these are our students, these are our needs, what's the best way to get them to that end point?* (Primary school teacher)

The planning process also involved ensuring that the program built systematically on students' own background knowledge and their prior educational learning:

> *The stage teams sometimes need reminding about carefully selecting and sequencing those learning experiences for our learners, so they're able to make connections from previous learning, even from term one and term two.* (Primary school teacher)

> *Well, learning (in Geography) about climate zones and population distribution, we were just doing our background checks and we thought, look at Afghanistan, look at Pakistan, such different countries. And so we thought, what a great opportunity to get children to investigate why are there (these differences) and actually supported the development of the outcome to see how natural landforms impact on the distribution of population. And we noticed (students saying) 'oh wow, that's my country, Afghanistan, oh, this is my country, Pakistan'. So, again, making those connections to their own countries. And also raising their self-concept and self-esteem, () 'my country', 'my mother country', 'it's (about) me', so I think it really helped in raising their self-esteem.* (Primary school teacher)

Teachers also spoke extensively about the value of **collaboration between EAL/D teacher and class teachers**:

> *Too often the EAL/D teacher is seen as just needing to be working with students and supporting their individual needs. But my personal view is that I think working with a colleague is much more powerful in terms of supporting needs of students, especially the refugee students, because they ultimately spend more time with*

their mainstream teacher than they do with their EAL/D teacher and it just seems much more effective to have EAL/D teachers working with mainstream teachers. Not just in the classroom, but within planning. I think it's an imperative that schools find their way around making times and providing opportunities for mainstream teachers to work with EAL/D teachers for planning programs.
(Primary school teacher)

It's (class teacher team teaching with EAL/D teacher) about working together and developing relationship to ensure that the best possible lesson is presented to the students ... it's a give and take situation so there are many opportunities where both teachers have benefitted greatly from a team teaching experience.
(Primary school teacher)

(Planning together means) we've already tackled the issue of language and then you've broken the lesson down to the level that the students can actually work independently or at least in a pair where they have some support and are not so dependent on the teacher support. (High school teacher)

(The importance of) highlighting the roles that the EAL/D teachers can potentially engage in within a school. … I really believe that it's more beneficial for (EAL/D) teachers to work with (classroom) teachers rather than just with students. Certainly we do need to work with students but it's more powerful to work with teachers so that that flow of information continues and the development of skills and strategies and understanding. And, with all due respect, not everybody is trained in EAL pedagogy, that's just the fact.
(Primary school teacher)

Teachers explained that collaborative planning assisted them to identify what they regarded as essential learning in their programs:

(Collaborative) planning time (for science) is needed for teachers to just sit down and ask 'what do we want our students to gain from learning this'. Because they might not end up being scientists, they might not be interested in science, but how can we make it relevant and then what are the strategies we can put in place in order to help the students learn better. (High school teacher)

We took a step back and we identified those essential – you call them essential questions but they're almost essential concepts, essential vocab that we want to really build strongly so it was more sort of a depth rather than breadth kind of approach. (Primary school teacher)

Classrooms of Possibility Working with students from refugee background in mainstream classes

Collaborative planning also assisted class/subject teachers to better understand the language and literacy needs of their refugee background students:

> *(The EAL/D teacher) gives me perspective on what I need to do in order to bridge that gap in (students') language barrier, particularly when I'm speaking all these science terms and she'll tell me, you know, we need an image or something like that. It changes your way of thinking of how you plan lessons.* (High school teacher)

Collaborative planning has provided both subject and EAL/D teachers with extra skills:

> *… because (the science teacher) has given me a little bit of an overview of the science itself and I've given her a little bit of an overview of the language, if at any particular point one of us is not here, the other can pick it up.* (High school teacher)

Teachers' overall views on the value of collaborative planning are summarised in the following quote:

> *I think if all the EAL/D teachers with their mainstream teachers were given that opportunity to have hopefully one day a week (for program planning), it would be so much better.* (High school teacher)

In program planning, teachers also found the use of **Rich Tasks** (New Basics, 2010) to be helpful. The purpose of a Rich Task is to engage students in a substantial and meaningful end-of-unit task that requires them to draw on, and consolidate, knowledge developed throughout the unit. Its purpose is also to link school knowledge to the broader world beyond school. Although the idea of Rich Tasks was new for some teachers, there was general agreement regarding the value of including these Tasks in their program plan. One teacher described this value as follows:

> *…so students get to see the links with the real world, and … you can link Rich Tasks to all different subject areas, literacy, numeracy, geography, history, it's all about the real world and for them to make those connections.* (Primary school teacher)

> *(Rich Tasks) help teachers to discuss why does this matter, why is this important. Because you always bring it back to that (the Task) and so for students, they think, okay, well, I need to be able to do this and get to that goal. So, these are the small steps I have to learn.* (Primary school teacher)

> *I think it's redefined our angle. And it's something that students, you know, you want to make it known to students as well, we're doing this (work) because at the end of this you're going to be writing this (information report about specific heritage sites in Australia).* (Primary school teacher)

Priorities in addressing pedagogical needs of students of refugee background

In addressing the pedagogical needs of refugee background students, teachers highlighted the importance of carefully planned lessons, with clear goals and clear purposes for learning. One teacher explained this starting point as the need to clarify *what you want (students) to be able to do by the end of that lesson and then sort of backward map to … our learning goals.* (Primary school teacher)

Teachers also highlighted the need to work from modelled to guided learning tasks, and only then, after ensuring students' understanding of concepts and of relevant language, finally to independent tasks.

Teachers in one school worked with a school-wide 'instructional model'. Within this model, lessons began with a 'hook' to engage students and to link with their prior learning. They identified a learning goal and success criteria *so that the students are very clear about what they need to be doing in that lesson.* They then proceeded from explicit modelling to guided tasks, *where the teacher actually explains step by step everything that the students will then be doing when they go on to participate in a guided activity.* (Primary school teacher). Teachers working with this model found it provided them with a very strong structure when it came to detailed planning of sequences of modelled, guided and, finally, independent tasks within lessons.

All teachers stressed the importance of '**slow teaching**' (Dufficy, 2005) where students have opportunities to work through a range of carefully sequenced tasks that address similar concepts, thereby enabling them to have time to develop understanding of the concepts and of the language required to talk, read or write about those concepts. Teachers also stressed the importance of providing high levels of targeted **scaffolding and message abundancy** (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Gibbons, 2015). They addressed the nature and value of these principles as follows:

> *The slow down approach is … you need to carefully select and sequence the activities, so don't rush through things.* (Primary school teacher)

> *'Slow' learning is important where we extend topics over several lessons (e.g. the Eureka Stockade), and it was quite (rich) for the students and we were able to learn a bit more in more depth as well as the vocabulary as well.* (Primary school teacher)

> *With our students, they'll need a lot of front loading (of support), a lot of building the field, a lot of message abundancy, a lot of visual support, so making sure that when we are programming we sort of do a bit of backward mapping. So, you know, this is where we want them to get to, but how are we going to get them there? Well, by these steps.* (Primary school teacher)

> *… so conductor, when the team were planning (the lesson) they said, oh yeah, just tell (students) what a conductor is and we thought, no, actually, let's do this experiment on conduction and then that way they really get to see what it all means.* (Primary school teacher)

> *So, the example (of message abundancy from the science lesson) yesterday, we had a worksheet with just fairly simple images and then with a word explaining what the image was. And then I went back and I thought, look, that still didn't make much sense so I had a video on the board, just a one minute clip, to show the process of electricity. And then we went through the worksheet again and had a look at the visuals.* (High school teacher)

Teachers also emphasised the value of '**talking to learn**' (Alexander, 2008). That is they emphasised the importance of ensuring students had opportunities to engage in substantive conversations that provided ongoing and in-depth discussion of ideas and concepts with their peers as well as with teachers, and in small groups as well as whole class discussions. They emphasised the importance of providing time for students to articulate their thinking and to talk their way to understanding. Teachers explained the value of talking to learn as follows:

> *I think particularly for the refugee students, giving them that time to have that discussion with the person next to them or in a small group before they're facing a whole class, allows that time for them to have their say or listen and feel more comfortable, having that extra time.* (Primary school teacher)

> *I just find that (opportunities for shared discussion of questions) really, really powerful and it's quite a big thing in the classroom – here's the question, tell the person next to you, come back, what did you hear? So it's a talking and listening opportunity.* (Primary school teacher)

> *Negotiation is a big skill that we want them to develop in not just one class but across the school, in fact. Because they need to be able to have those exchanges and know when to stop talking and 'I'm listening to you now'.*
> (Primary school teacher)

A number of teachers spoke of the value for students of **using their first language in learning**. Teachers reported that by encouraging students to 'talk to learn', they were also able to provide space for students to learn in their first language. By providing opportunities for students to use their first language, teachers were better placed to gauge students' understanding of key concepts. One teacher explained:

> *M., she's just arrived last week and we were playing a maths game, going around counting by threes, and she knew the answer in Assyrian. So … I had the others, yeah, Miss, she said it but in Assyrian.* (Primary school teacher)

Teachers pointed out that opportunities for discussion in their first language not only assisted students in learning key educational concepts, but also provided a strong basis for learning the relevant English.

Teaching of language and literacy within mainstream curriculum programs

In addition to 'talking to learn', teachers spoke extensively about the importance of learning academic English, and the importance of students '**learning to talk**', as well as learning to read and write, in academic registers of English. They emphasised the need for class/ subject teachers to think of themselves also as teachers of English language and literacy, and to integrate the teaching of language and literacy into cross-curriculum programs.

> *It means thinking about all the key learning areas from the point of view both of the curriculum content and of the language; so (it means working) simultaneously with the geography curriculum and the English curriculum.* (Primary school teacher)

> *We need to have the mindset that language is taught in any curriculum area ... a lot of times I would argue that there's more language taught in geography and history and science than there is actually in the literacy session.*
> *(*Primary school teacher)

> *Wherever possible we would try to integrate, especially when we're teaching text types and genres, to integrate it with a content-based subject.*
> (Primary school teacher)

Teachers also framed the teaching of academic English in relation to discussion of purposes of learning within specific units of work and more generally within discussion of purposes of studying specific curriculum areas. Within this frame, students were encouraged to think, talk and write like scientists or geographers or historians.

> *In the first semester we wanted the students to be able to think, talk and write like scientists. But this semester it's talk, think and write like geographers.*
> (Primary school executive)

> *Yeah. I think it's important that they link that (ie purpose of learning and language). Because this is your real life authenticity of what you're learning at school because you're going to use this when you finish school.* (Primary school teacher)

> *And that's why we started with what is a scientist because it tied in everything from here, every word you're going to hear is science related.* (Primary school teacher)

In their interviews teachers were asked about ways in which they integrated the teaching of specific aspects of English language and literacy within their content-based programs. Their responses primarily addressed teaching of vocabulary and relevant text types.

Systematic teaching of **vocabulary** was a clear priority for teachers. They described strategies to reinforce content-based vocabulary, and they reported encouraging their students to talk about vocabulary, and to ask questions if they encountered words that they did not understand.

> *It's important to find the time to prioritise the vocabulary teaching and don't just throw out all these words at the students, but take time to teach them this is some words you might hear. Do that for every lesson ... I think it's highly beneficial but especially for the refugee students, to spend that quality time and show that (word meaning) in context as well, so it's not just this is a word you might see, this is what it means. But then making sure you make that conscious effort when it does come up later on in your lesson that you say this is a word that we looked at before.* (Primary school teacher)

> *As a science teacher I'm speaking, you know, in a language that's difficult for them to understand and then I'm putting in all this science terminology that just, you know, doesn't stick. So I need to really work on this.* (High school teacher)

> *During the planning process I think the most important step that we engaged in was identifying the vocabulary that's required to make sure the student is successful.* (Primary school teacher)

Teachers also identified explicit teaching of **text-types** relevant to content-based units of work as a priority.

> *Information reports sit perfectly with geography.*
> (Primary school teacher)

> *I guess, you're looking then at the Rich Task or the end product of what you want them to be able to write, or want them to be able to do, and then looking at the text type and language demands within that, the vocabulary they'll need to have, the writing skills.*
> (Primary school teacher)

> *Our starting point is to look at the assessment task and then we go from there. Year 7 might cover an element of news, a feature article, whereas year 8 or 9 will continue with the idea of news and media but in an opinion piece or persuasive writing.* (High school teacher)

Teachers differed in the extent to which they reported teaching other aspects of language and literacy – especially the teaching of grammar. However, one school had recently participated in a whole school professional development program that included a focus on grammar. Teachers reported that this program had significantly impacted on their approaches to teaching English language and literacy.

> *They (teachers in the school) seriously now know that they have to plan and program, not just teaching vocabulary and structures of text but explicitly teaching grammar.* (Primary school executive)

Teachers from that school acknowledged the impact of the program on their own knowledge about language.

> *We know for example, why is it this type of verb not this type of verb.*
> (Primary school teacher)

They also acknowledged the challenge, as well as benefits, of some of the proposals from the professional development program.

> *We always found joint constructions the most challenging, not just for the learners but for ourselves. … I think it (joint construction) is an essential part of any (teaching-learning) cycle because it's a good gauge for us as well, formative assessment for us to see what the students have learnt in the previous term, I'm not talking this term, but in term one and term two.* (Primary school teacher)

Finally, although all teachers agreed on the overall importance of supporting their refugee background students in their English language and literacy development, they also pointed to the diversity of these students, and to the diversity of their English language and literacy needs. As a result, they stressed the need to be able to work flexibly to address the English language and literacy needs of their refugee background students as well as those of other students within their classes. To do this, as one teacher explained:

> *You constantly have to be really tuning in and listening to what the kids are saying.*
> (Primary school teacher)

Advice to other teachers

Interviewees were asked what advice they would give to other teachers who were working with refugee background students in their classes. Their responses clustered around the following points:

- the importance for teachers of working with high expectations while also providing students with time and necessary support to engage both with curriculum concepts and with relevant academic English, and
- the need for ongoing EAL professional development to support all teachers in this enterprise.

Interviewees stressed the importance of **high teacher expectations**, and the impact of expectations on the educational success of refugee background students. They also stressed the importance of providing intellectual push so their students were challenged and stretched in their academic development. And they pointed to the danger of equating the label 'refugee' with a deficit view of students' capabilities. One teacher spoke of this as follows:

> *I personally don't like to sort of label a child as a refugee. As an educator, it may lead me to think that they may not be able to achieve something so in some ways it may have a negative connotation to a teacher who doesn't fully understand what a refugee is. So, I would advise teachers, of course it's important to be able to know that this child has had, is a refugee or has had refugee experiences. But, at the same time, ensure that the child is able to integrate with the whole group and group them with maybe a more capable child. Of course, it has to be somebody who shares their same language in order to support them. But I think having those high expectations will assist them to make higher growth and achieve higher academic outcomes for them.* (Primary school teacher)

Interviewees recognised that the major challenge for teachers of refugee background students lay in balancing high expectations of students' educational success, with the provision of **systematic support** for students in their developing curriculum knowledge and academic English. In addressing this challenge, teachers offered the following advice:

> *I think one of the keys is differentiating for the newly arrived students that have been here for a few months and, really, for those students that are maybe gifted in class. But that's what we have to do as teachers. We don't want our newly arrived refugee students doing something just to keep them busy and quiet, we want them to be engaged in the curriculum. And our challenge is how we do that.*

> *And we have to be really, we really need to be reflective of our practice and really carefully think about the level of scaffolding we require to support these students.* (Primary school executive)

> *We have to think that they (refugee background students) are going to succeed and to do that we have to have knowledge about what's best practice and how to teach language ... it needs to be explicitly taught.* (Primary school teacher)

When summarising advice to other teachers on how to provide students with space and support in their learning, one teacher made the following comment: *Slow it down.* (Primary school teacher)

Another teacher said: *Never underestimate your students and what they are capable of.* (High school teacher)

In discussing ways of balancing principles of high challenge and high support, interviewees stressed the importance of having access to **EAL professional development support**. They argued that for class and subject teachers who are working with significant numbers of refugee background students, the ongoing support provided by these programs enabled teachers to incorporate EAL principles into their programs and to work more seamlessly with specialist EAL/D teachers. As one of the EAL/D teachers explained, this means that class and EAL/D teachers *share the same language*.

A number of interviewees spoke of the value of some of the (professional learning) programs offered by the NSW Department of Education. These included the **Teaching English Language Learners** (TELL) program that had been implemented across the school. Another interviewee described the benefits of participating in the **Teaching students from a refugee background** professional learning program:

> *It really brought back, okay, yep, this is what I need to consider and think about to be able to cater for these students, provide that sort of safe, supportive environment firstly for them and then look at their learning needs … and getting to understand who they are, where they've come from, what schooling they've had and it becomes quite evident.* (Primary school teacher)

One school executive summarised the broader benefits of EAL professional development support for classroom teachers as follows:

> *I've always been big on teachers being able to articulate the pedagogy that they're using and since A (name of teacher) is not an EAL/D teacher, and she talks about moving students along a mode continuum, she talks about message abundancy – she's got the 'talk' of an EAL/D teacher but she's a mainstream teacher. She can articulate the pedagogy that she uses. And she might've used the strategies before but now she knows they're grounded in theory.*
> (Primary school executive)

In sum, the interviewees paint a picture of students who have had to deal with a complex world at a young age, but who are resilient and responsive to their schools, to their teachers, and to life in Australia. The interviewees also highlighted ways in which the schools have responded sympathetically and creatively to the strengths and challenges that refugee background

students bring to their education. In discussing their approaches to the education of refugee background students, teachers highlighted the importance of established principles of EAL education – those of high challenge and high support, and they provided insights into ways in which they incorporate these principles into their teaching and learning practices. As the following section shows, outcomes from the interviews complemented those that emerge from analysis of classroom lessons.

Outcomes from lesson observations and analysis

Overall findings

A major part of the research was the observation and video recording of classroom lessons in the four schools. A total of 24 lessons were recorded during the project. The distribution of lessons across schools and curriculum areas is shown in Table 2:

Recorded lessons in the four research schools

Primary School 1	Primary School 2	High School 1	High School 2
History (3)	Science (3)	English (3)	Science (3)
Geography (3)	Geography (3)	English (3)	Science (3)

As indicated, the method of analysis of lessons used in the research was based on procedures developed in previous related research (Hammond, 2014a). This procedure involved analysis of each lesson in relation to specific pedagogical features. These features consisted of a combination of those identified from earlier research in EAL pedagogy, and from selected Elements of the NSW Quality Teaching Model, that we considered were especially significant for EAL/D students (see Section 2 of this report for a summary of these Dimensions and Elements). As in the previous research, and in line with the NSW Quality Teaching Model, lessons were analysed in relation to the three major Dimensions of *Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment* and *Significance*. As also indicated, the analysis involved the coding of elements within each of these three Dimensions from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong).

Note: For brevity, the term 'element' is used in the following discussion to refer both to selected Elements from the NSW Quality Teaching Model, and the EAL pedagogical features of Academic Language, Scaffolding and Explicit Goals.

The total number of lessons analysed in this research was small (24 lessons) and therefore caution is necessary in presenting and interpreting outcomes from the analysis. For this reason, only combined findings from all 24 lessons are presented below. Outcomes from analysis of lessons are NOT discussed in terms of breakdown of primary and high school lessons, or of Phase 1 and Phase 2 lessons. However, in the following discussion a descriptive comparison between primary and high schools and between outcomes in phase 1 and phase 2, is included where relevant.

The system of analysis enables some comparison with outcomes from the previous research that addressed the transition of students of refugee background from Intensive English Centres to high schools. Since one of the aims of the current research was to build on outcomes from

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the previous research, especially in regard to identified pedagogical gaps, the possibility for comparison is important. It enables us to gauge, at least to some extent, the impact of the intervention that was central to the design of the current research. However, with small numbers of lessons in both projects (24 and 32 respectively), we must be careful of making too much of comparisons. It should also be emphasised that the analysis of lessons in the research is not intended to 'prove' anything, but rather to highlight patterns within and across lessons, as well as to provide insights into the ways in which teachers were able to work with students of refugee background in their mainstream classes.

An overview from analysis of all lessons is presented in Table 1.

Within Table 1, elements relevant to each Dimension are listed on the left side of the Table, and findings from coding of lessons in regard to each element are listed across the top of the Table. These findings are summarised in terms of range of coding (1 – 5); most frequent code; average code; and the percentage of lessons where coding was 4 or above (that is, where coding indicated that lessons were very strong in regard to that element). The summary thus provides an indication of the relative strength of each Dimension and element across the 24 lessons.

Table 1: Outcomes from coding of all school lessons

	range of codes (1-5)	most frequent code	average code	percentage coded 4 or above
Dimension 1: Intellectual Quality				
Deep Knowledge	2.5 - 5	5	4.5	75%
Deep Understanding	2.5 - 5	5	4	67%
Substantive Communication	2 - 5	5	4	67%
Academic Language Focus	2 to 4	2.5; 3	2.9	22%
Dimension 2: Quality Learning Environment				
Explicit Goals	1.5 - 5	5	4	58%
Engagement	2 - 5	5	4	71%
High Expectations	2.5 - 5	5	4.5	75%
Social Support	4 - 5	5	5	100%
Scaffolding	2 - 5	5	4.5	71%
Dimension 3: Significance				
Background Knowledge	2 - 5	4.5	4	63%
Cultural Knowledge	1 - 5	1	1.5	8%
Connectedness	2 - 5	5	4	63%
Inclusivity	3 - 5	5	4.5	92%

Areas of strength within lessons

The summary analysis shows that lessons in the four schools were strong in all three Dimensions of Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance. The average code for all elements, except Academic Language and Cultural Knowledge (see below), was 4 or above; and, for all elements, again except for Academic Language and Cultural Knowledge, at least 55% of lessons were coded as 4 or above. Lessons in the schools, overall, were characterised by an emphasis on deep knowledge and understanding, on supportive and positive learning environments, and on making links both to students' prior learning, and to the world beyond school. Thus, the overall picture that emerges from this analysis is a positive one of strong lessons that challenge students intellectually while also providing high levels of support, and where students are actively engaged in learning.

Within this positive picture there is also evidence of some variation between lessons in relation to the relative strength of most elements. For example, the range of codes for most elements varied between 2 or 2.5 and 5. Variation between lessons is to be expected - not every lesson within a unit will be strong in every element; nor, as a unit unfolds, will every lesson reflect the same pattern of strengths. However, the level of variation in relation to a number of the elements, suggests some unevenness across lessons.

To address the findings in more detail, the following sections take a closer look at the patterns of relative strength and weakness across the lessons. Patterns of stronger and weaker elements are identified by the percentage of lessons that were coded as 4 or above - a high percentage of codings of 4 or above indicates that an element was observed frequently across lessons, and hence that element is regarded as a strength across the lessons, while a low percentage of codings of 4 or above indicates that an element was observed infrequently, and hence that element is regarded as an area of relative weakness across the lessons. Findings in regard to the elements of Academic Language and Cultural Background are also discussed in further detail below.

The strongest elements (75% of lessons coded at 4 or above)

In all schools a number of elements emerged as consistent and particular strengths. In our analysis, these elements were coded as 4 or above in at least 75% of lessons. They include the following:

- Social Support (100%)
- Inclusivity (92%)
- Deep Knowledge (75%)
- High Expectations (75%)

Perhaps the clearest and most consistent strength across all lessons in all schools was the level of social support and inclusivity that was available for the students. The most frequent code across all lessons for the elements of Social Support and Inclusivity was 5; all lessons were coded at 4 or above for Social Support (100%), and the majority were coded at 4 or above for Inclusivity (92%). These findings indicate that students in all schools participated in learning environments that were consistently warm and welcoming; where they felt safe and included; and where interactions between teachers and students, as well as between students, were characterised by mutual respect. As other research has shown (Cranitch, 2010; Dooley, 2009; Windle & Miller, 2012) such learning environments provide an essential basis if such students are to engage in any effective learning. Indeed, without such environments, little learning is likely to take place.

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The analysis also shows that the lessons were consistently strong in providing students with access to high challenge curriculum concepts, and with the expectations that they would engage with these concepts. At least 75% of all lessons were coded at 4 or above for the key elements of Deep Knowledge and High Expectations. That is, lessons consistently involved a sustained and in-depth focus on a small number of key concepts and ideas, and the relationships between these concepts; and teachers expected, and encouraged, all students to participate in challenging work throughout the lessons. The combination of high Social Support and Inclusivity with Deep Knowledge and High Expectations was particularly positive as it meant that all students, including those of refugee background, were encouraged to take risks in their learning and were supported to do so. Findings here are also important as they provide evidence that teachers successfully included all students, including those of refugee backgrounds, in high challenge programs.

Strong elements (55% - 74% of lessons coded at 4 or above)

In addition to the four very strong elements, there was a cluster of elements in all schools across all three Dimensions of Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance that were consistently strong in the lessons. In our analysis these elements were coded as 4 or above for between 55% and 74% of lessons. There was some variation between lessons in regard to these elements (codings for most elements varied from 2 or 2.5 to 5), however, the average code for each element was 4 or 4.5, which we interpret as evidence of overall strength across lessons. Elements in this category include the following:

- Deep Understanding (67%)
- Substantive Communication (67%)
- Engagement (71%)
- Scaffolding (71%)
- Explicit Goals (58%)
- Background Knowledge (63%)
- Connectedness (63%)

Within the Dimension of Intellectual Quality, important 'strong elements' were Deep Understanding and Substantive Communication – both with 67% of lessons coded at 4 or above. While codings for these elements were slightly lower than for Deep Knowledge, analyses of combined elements within the Dimension of Intellectual Quality, indicate that most students in most lessons had access to high challenge curriculum concepts, and, importantly, were able to understand these concepts. Analyses also suggest that students had regular opportunities to 'talk to learn' – that is, to develop and demonstrate understandings through engagement in ongoing substantial discussions with their teachers and their peers.

'Strong elements' within the Dimension of Quality Learning Environment included Scaffolding and Engagement, as well as Explicit Goals. Of these, Scaffolding and Engagement were particularly strong (each with 71% of lessons coded as 4 or above). Both elements contribute to classrooms where teachers and students are clearly focused on learning. Our analysis thus indicates that students were generally provided with the necessary high levels of support to enable them to engage with high challenge concepts. That is, most students in most lessons had access to pre-planned and point of need support that was differentiated and targeted to the abilities and learning needs of specific students, including those of refugee background. In addition, high levels of student engagement meant that most students most of the time took their work in the lessons seriously, and that they were focused and involved in learning.

Explicit Goals were also included in the cluster of 'strong elements'. However, coding for this element was somewhat lower than for others in this category (58% of lessons were coded as 4 or above for this element), and there was more variation between lessons for this element than for others (codings for Explicit Goals ranged from 1.5 to 5). The analysis thus suggests that while some lessons were very strong in articulation of purposes and procedures of learning, others were less so. That is, in some lessons, there was extensive discussion between teacher and students of unit goals, of purposes of lessons and tasks in relation to overall curriculum and unit goals, as well as discussion of assessment tasks. However, as lesson observations confirmed, this did not occur evenly across all lessons, with high school lessons varying more than primary schools here. Following mid-year input sessions where feedback from lesson analysis was provided to the research team, high school lessons showed a greater level of articulation of purposes and procedures for learning. One of the recommendations from the previous research in regard to pedagogical practices was that purposes and significance of learning needed to be strengthened. While many lessons in the current project included a systematic focus on purposes and significance of learning, the unevenness of this element across lessons suggests that this is an area that needs to be further addressed, especially in high schools.

Within the Dimension of Significance, codings for Background Knowledge and Connectedness (each with 63% of lessons coded as 4 or above) were generally strong. As with other elements, there was evidence of some variation between lessons in regard to these elements (codings of both ranged from 2 to 5), but the analysis indicates that most lessons, most of the time, made connections beyond the lesson to students' prior background and educational knowledge, and also to the world beyond school (average coding for these elements was 4). That is, most lessons built on students' out of school background knowledge and/or systematically built on students' prior educational learning. In addition, most lessons made substantial connections between classroom knowledge and the world outside the classroom in ways that highlighted the broader significance of the knowledge with which students were engaged.

Weaker elements (below 55% of lessons coded at 4 or above))

The analysis of lessons pointed to two areas of relative weakness in both primary and high school lessons. These areas are represented by the following elements:

- Academic Language Focus (38%)
- Cultural Knowledge (8%)

In our analysis, the element of Academic Language Focus sits within the Dimension of Intellectual Challenge. As indicated above, other elements within this Dimension (Deep Knowledge, Deep Understanding and Substantive Communication) all emerged as consistent strengths across the lessons. In contrast, the element of Academic Language Focus was coded lower than for these other elements (only 38% of lessons were coded as 4 or above, with average code of 3.5). This element addresses the extent to which the teaching of academic English is interwoven with teaching of curriculum content. Such teaching includes, as relevant, analysis of texts and text structure, paragraph organisation, sentence grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and pronunciation. It also includes strategies for reading and for identifying relevant information when undertaking research.

Our analyses showed systematic and consistent teaching of vocabulary across lessons; and very positive modelling of academic language and literacy. However, the analyses also showed less systematic teaching of other aspects of academic language and literacy, especially of paragraph organisation and sentence grammar. There was also considerable variation between lessons in regard to this element (codings for Academic Language Focus

ranged from 1.5 to 5), and between primary and high schools - more systematic teaching of academic English language occurred in primary than in high schools. Findings here are broadly consistent with those from previous research that also found weaknesses across lessons in regard to the teaching of academic language and literacy. Yet, as outcomes from teacher interviews in both projects show, the development of academic language and literacy is clearly recognised by participating teachers as an area of particular need for students of refugee background. So why was the inclusion of systematic and explicit teaching of academic language and literacy so uneven across lessons?

There appear to be a number of factors at play here:

• pressure of time – especially in high schools where there is consistent pressure to 'get through the curriculum';
• the extent of teachers' own knowledge about language and literacy; and
• the availability of support for teachers regarding ways of incorporating language and literacy across the curriculum.

What emerges from the current and previous research is a complex picture of recognition of need, but variation, even with highly skilled teachers, in terms of their confidence and knowledge of ways of teaching academic English, including text level analysis, cohesion, sentence grammar, as well as vocabulary, across the curriculum. This is an important issue, and it is addressed in further detail in the following section of the report.

The second area of apparent weakness is that of Cultural Knowledge – although here the situation is different from that of Academic Language Focus. The element of Cultural Knowledge addresses the extent to which lessons recognise and value knowledge other than that of the dominant culture; and the extent to which they incorporate the cultural knowledge of diverse social and linguistic groupings such as class, gender, ethnicity, linguistic and cultural diversity; disability and religion.

Analyses of lessons in the current and previous research have shown lessons were consistently coded as low for Cultural Knowledge. We argue that the research undertaken in both projects has raised questions regarding the relevance of this element for all lessons. While some curriculum areas and some lessons lend themselves comfortably to the inclusion of Cultural Knowledge (for example, Geography), others, such as Science and Maths, may not. Our analyses include examples of very strong lessons that have been coded as 4 or above for every element except for Cultural Knowledge. We argue the inclusion of the element of Cultural Knowledge remains important for the kind of analysis of lessons undertaken in this research as it highlights the importance of acknowledging students' own knowledge and the potential resources that they bring to the learning environment. However, we also argue that this element will not necessarily be relevant in every lesson, and we do not regard low coding of this element necessarily as an indication of weakness in the lesson.

Comparisons with previous research findings

As indicated, a major aim of the *Classrooms of Possibility* project was to build on outcomes from previous related research (Hammond, 2014). Although the earlier project found there were important strengths across school in terms of the learning environment and support that was available to students of refugee background, it also found that some pedagogical practices could be further strengthened. The project therefore recommended the need for more systematic scaffolding; more consistent and explicit teaching of language and literacy across the curriculum; more focus on purposes of learning; and more support for students in understanding the requirement of assessment tasks. Analysis of lessons undertaken in this

project drew on the same system of analysis that had been developed for the earlier research, thereby enabling some comparisons to be made between findings in the two projects. The purpose of any comparison is not to draw definitive conclusions, and with the relatively small numbers of lessons in each project, caution needs to be exercised here. Rather, the purpose is to consider the extent to which the current project has built on previous findings; to explore patterns in the findings; and to consider the implications of these patterns for the kinds of pedagogical practices that are most likely to benefit students of refugee background. It is this purpose that informs the following discussion.

What emerges from analysis of the twenty-four *Classrooms of Possibility* lessons, is a positive pattern of consistent and numerous strengths, but also identification of a small number of specific areas that could be further strengthened. The analysis shows that lessons were strong across all three Dimensions of Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance. Particular strengths lay in the nature of the learning environments within individual classrooms (Social Support), and in the extent to which all students were included in all lessons (Inclusivity). These findings are consistent with those from the previous research that found schools were very good at providing supportive, safe, inclusive and caring environments for all students, and that such environments were especially important for students of refugee background who had experienced major disruptions and trauma in their lives.

Other consistent strengths in *Classrooms of Possibility* lessons lay in students' access to high challenge curriculum concepts (Deep Knowledge) and in teachers' expectations that students should, and could, engage with these concepts (High Expectations). Importantly, the analysis also provided evidence of high levels of student understanding of curriculum concepts, of student participation in substantive communication, and of their engagement in learning. Equally importantly, it provided evidence that the high levels of differentiated support available to students enabled them to engage with these key curriculum concepts, and to make links between curriculum concepts and the world outside of school. In these areas the findings contrast with those from the previous research. There we found that although students generally had access to high challenge curriculum content, many were unable to understand and engage with that content. We also found that often the nature and level of support for students' learning was not sufficiently systematic or targeted to enable them to engage at a deep level with challenging curriculum concepts, or to make connections between what they were learning at school and the outside world. Indeed, the previous research found that connections to students' background knowledge and prior educational knowledge were amongst the weaker elements in high school lessons, so the overall strength of these elements in the current research is important.

Analysis of *Classrooms of Possibility* lessons also indicates there are two areas, in particular, that would benefit from further professional support: purposes of learning (explicit goals) and academic language teaching. These elements were much stronger in the *Classrooms of Possibility* lessons than in the previous research, and in some programs were consistently strong across lessons. However, the pattern that emerges is broadly consistent with that from the previous research – of uneven focus on purposes of learning, and of inconsistency in the extent to which academic English is systematically incorporated into programs across the curriculum. It is relevant to point out that *Classrooms of Possibility* lessons were consistently stronger in regard to these areas in Phase 2 of the research – a finding that indicates the positive impact of professional support on teaching and learning practices.

In sum, the patterns emerging from analysis of *Classrooms of Possibility* lessons suggest that these lessons have addressed gaps, especially in scaffolding and message abundancy that were identified in the previous research. They also suggest that these lessons, undertaken by experienced and highly capable teachers, provide models of good teaching and learning

practices, and that the processes of planning and implementation of programs evident in the research can provide role models and exemplars for other schools where teachers are working with refugee background students in mainstream classes.

The following section elaborates implications of these models of good practice. It does so by outlining factors that have emerged from the research project as a whole – factors that together contribute to supportive learning environments and positive educational outcomes for students of refugee background.
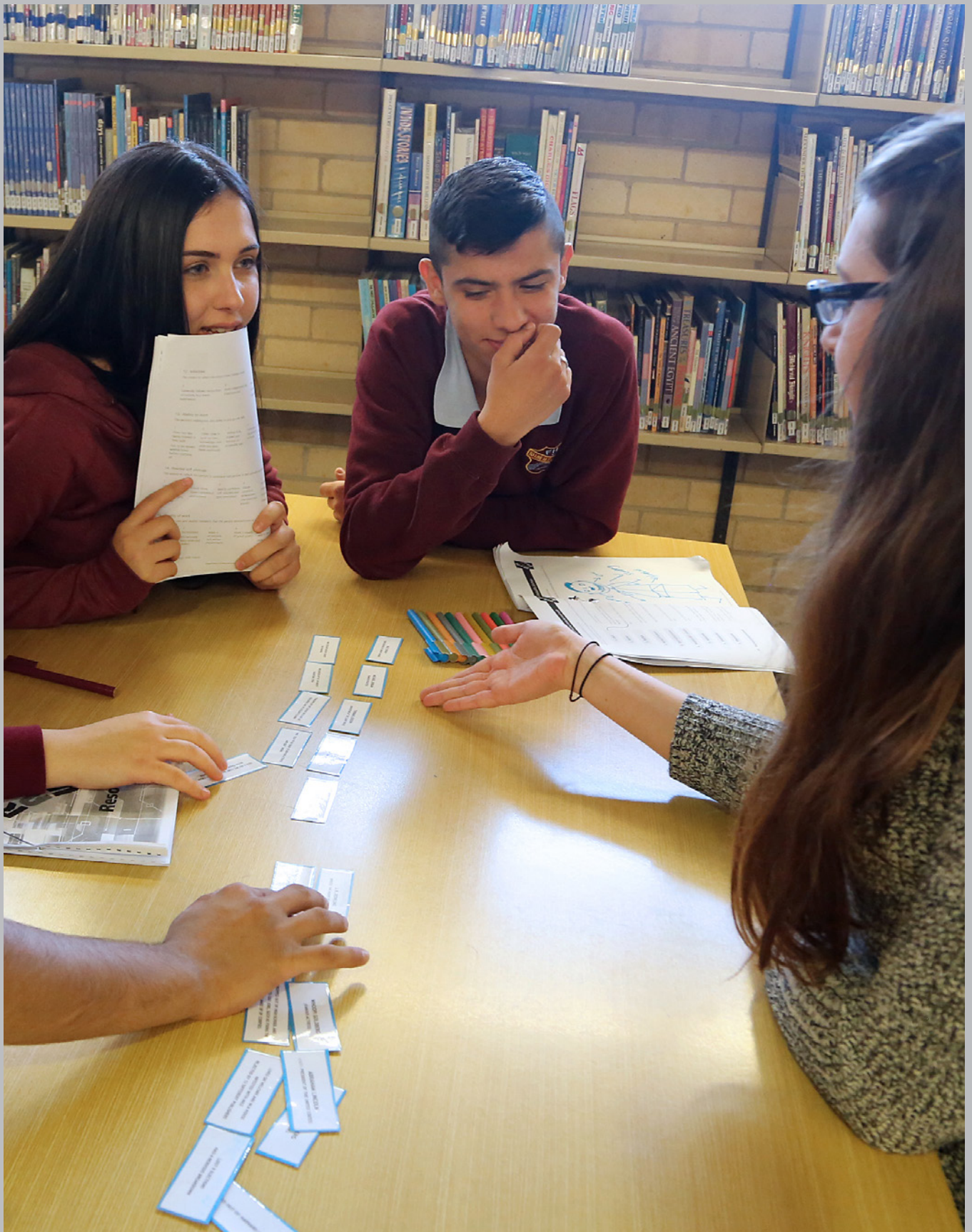
5. Summary of research findings

Factors that contribute to successful learning

Outcomes from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research enable us to elaborate previous findings of strengths and gaps in teaching and learning practices. In what follows, we draw on findings from all sources of data to summarise key factors that were identified in the research as contributing to positive learning environments for students of refugee background in mainstream classes. Individually, these factors are not uniquely relevant to the education of students of refugee background. However, research findings indicate that, together, they contribute to learning environments that provide high challenge curriculum programs for refugee background students, while also providing the high levels of support necessary to enable students to engage with high challenge programs and to achieve academic success. These factors include:

- Positive, supportive and predictable school and class learning environments;
- School structures that support processes of collaborative program planning;
- Clarifying purposes for learning and sharing these purposes with students;
- Planning and implementing high challenge programs;
- Planning and implementing high support programs;
- Providing students with opportunities to 'talk to learn' and to 'learn to talk' (and read and write) academic English.

We elaborate on each of these factors below.

School and class learning environments

One of the most consistent messages to emerge from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research is the importance of safe, supportive and predictable learning environments for students of refugee background. This was also a key message in our previous project (Hammond, 2014a), and it is consistent with research findings in other contexts (Cranitch, 2010; Windle & Miller, 2012). In some ways this is an obvious message, and of course it can be argued that a positive learning environment is relevant for any student. However, for students of refugee background, with all that entails, the nature of learning environments is pivotal to students' educational success. Students' initial experiences within Australian schools can either set them up for a pathway to educational and future life success or can turn them away from school altogether. It is therefore difficult to overemphasise the importance of students' learning environments - both at the level of whole school organisation, and at the level of individual programs and classes. The learning environment provides the basis for any effective learning.

Whole school level

Outcomes from the research show that participating schools provided models of positive, safe and supportive whole school learning environments. These environments were characterised by warm and welcoming 'good feel' atmospheres. They were also characterised by calm and friendly interactions; by humour and by positive attitudes on the part of both teachers and students. Students acknowledged the positive atmospheres in their schools, and, in their interviews, stated that they saw their schools as welcoming places where they were happy to be. A feature of these environments was that all schools embodied very clear values of mutual respect, trust and acceptance of diversity. This mutual respect was evident in the nature of interactions that occurred between teachers and students, between school staff and families, and in clear and consistent procedures for discipline - all of which contributed to a predictable

and secure environment for the students. Mutual respect was evident in the emphasis on learning about, and celebrating, some of the key cultural and religious practices and events of different communities within the schools. The environments were also characterised by the number and variety of programs that were in place to support students, their families and their teachers. These programs addressed:

- initial enrolment procedures and support for families;
- community engagement with the school;
- support for students' wellbeing, academic progress and engagement with their learning;
- support for teacher professional development.

Of particular relevance to our research were the programs that supported students' wellbeing and academic progress. As indicated earlier in the discussion of interviews, these included:

- homework and tutoring programs offered in high schools and organised in collaboration with universities. Here university students worked at the schools with individuals or pairs of refugee background students to help clarify key curriculum concepts and to support them in 'unpacking' and completing assessment tasks;
- mentoring programs in which university students assist refugee background students to learn more about tertiary pathways;
- community language programs where students have two hours of instruction per week in their home language during school hours;
- extra-curricular programs that encourage students' recovery from trauma and overall engagement with school. These include different sports, dance groups, drumming groups; playing with a band; learning musical instruments; debating club; chess clubs, and art classes;
- breakfast club to ensure students start the day with a substantial meal.

(See discussion of interviews for further details of these and other school-wide programs.)

Program/class level

Respectful, safe and supportive learning environments were also evident within our research schools at the level of individual programs and classes. In their interviews teachers emphasised the importance of predictability for students within their classes, and the importance of consistent, clear structures and routines within lessons. They explained that the reinforcement of these routines assisted students, especially those who had experienced very different educational contexts, to develop understandings of what it meant to 'do school' within the Australian context, and of what it meant to be a 'good student'. Our observations confirmed the importance of clearly structured and well-paced lessons, as well as consistent and predictable class routines. Teachers emphasised the importance of providing students with consistent, explicit and positive feedback on values and behaviour within class, and also on their progress in learning. Details of how teachers structured their lessons, and of the ways in which they provided students with feedback on their learning are further addressed in following sections.

In sum, the research highlighted the importance of learning environments that are characterised by:

- supportive environments at both school and classroom levels, where students and their families feel welcomed, valued and safe; and where high priority is attached to students' wellbeing;
- supportive relationships with teacher(s) and other students;

- predictable learning environments that include reinforcement of clear routines within lessons, and firm and consistent classroom management;
- consistent, positive feedback to students on values and behaviour and also on their progress in learning; (ie reinforcement of how to 'do class/school' and of how to be a successful student).

Program planning

Program planning generated extensive discussion within the *Classrooms of Possibility* research. In their interviews, in program planning meetings, and also in professional input sessions, teachers spoke extensively of the importance of school structures that facilitated and supported collaborative planning over periods of time. They spoke of the value of working with clear guidelines in their processes of program planning, and the value of cycles of reflection and evaluation in the planning process. They also spoke of the benefits when EAL/D teachers took a very active role in this whole process.

Structures that facilitated collaborative program planning

Teachers argued that the planning process began with **knowing their students**. This began with school structures that provided teachers with access to background information about individual students, including their refugee status; their abilities in English language and literacy; and their abilities in their first language(s), including literacy ability in that language. Such information did not mean that students of refugee background were singled out in any obvious way, but it did mean that teachers gained insights into students' past experiences and were therefore better placed to address needs that may arise from these experiences. It also meant they had at least some access to 'what students already know and what they don't know'. With access to this information, teachers were well placed to undertake detailed analyses of students' educational knowledge and skills, as well as analyses of their English language and literacy abilities. They were also well placed to undertake analyses of what students needed to know in order to be able to participate in a full curriculum within mainstream classes.

Teachers in the research also emphasised the value of collaborative **planning between class/ subject teacher and EAL/D teacher**. Recognition of the value of collaboration between class/ subject and EAL/D teachers is not new. Discussions of this relationship, and of the benefits of various models of EAL/D support within Australian schools, have taken place over many years. However, our research suggests that the role of EAL/D teachers in schools remains a live issue. In their interviews, teachers explained the benefits of collaborative planning in terms of effective use of EAL/D teachers' time - EAL/D teachers could have more impact at the stage of program planning, rather than trying to provide unplanned input into every class. They also stressed the value of sharing expertise - where EAL/D teachers' expertise in language and literacy complemented the class/subject teachers' expertise in curriculum knowledge. As one teacher explained:

> *After this (shared planning meeting), even without (EAL/D teacher) in the room, I would be able to conduct my lessons and still be able to support the students and have that tiered instruction and differentiation in the classroom because it has been fleshed out (in the planning process).* (High school teacher)

Such arguments are not new, but they remain centrally important to effective processes of program planning. They also raise the issue of **time for program planning.**

A benefit for teachers who participated in the *Classrooms of Possibility* research, was the availability of funding to schedule additional shared planning time. While all research schools already had some provision of time for program planning, teachers spoke extensively of the positive impact of the additional time on the quality of their programs. It enabled them to refine programs, and to plan more detailed sequences of activities within lessons that were designed to meet the specific needs of their students. The research indicated that the allocation of time for collaborative planning had a direct impact on overall quality of programs that are available to students.

Processes to support quality programming

As part of the collaborative program planning process, teachers and researchers worked together through a sequence of **questions to guide program planning**. (See Appendix B). These proved useful as a way of structuring discussions and decisions in the program planning process. The areas of focus within the Guiding Questions reflect established procedures in program development that are familiar to many teachers and educators (see for example, Gibbons, 2009). However, the specific questions within each area of focus were refined during the *Classrooms of Possibility* research to ensure that the specific needs of refugee background students were addressed in the planning process.

Teachers reported a number of benefits for program planning of working collaboratively with these kinds of guiding questions. Resulting discussions helped clarify key concepts and program goals that were central to the unit teachers were planning; they helped the detailed planning of sequences of lessons and tasks to ensure programs provided small steps in learning with high levels of support; and they helped teachers include necessary levels of support for students' English language and literacy development. Teachers also valued the opportunities for reflection and evaluation that were built into the questions; they found the questions provided a useful checklist for planning decisions; and they helped to clarify and sharpen the overall cohesion of their programs.

In sum, the research highlighted the importance in program planning of:

- school structures that facilitate and enable collaborative planning over periods of time, with particular emphasis on:
  - sharing relevant information about students to assist all teachers to know their students;
  - time for EAL/D and class / subject teachers to meet and work collaboratively;
  - opportunities for the EAL/D teacher to take an active role in the collaborative planning process;
- clear guidelines for program planning (such as the **Questions to Guide Program Planning**) that facilitate:
  - analysis of students' strengths and needs, and analysis of curriculum demands;
  - clarification of learning goals (of units and lessons);
  - planning for high challenge and high support;
  - opportunities for teacher reflection, and evaluation of effectiveness of programs.

Clarifying purposes for learning

A key finding of previous research (Hammond, 2014a) was that students, especially those of refugee backgrounds, often participated in lessons, and in tasks within lessons, without understanding why they were doing so, or what they were supposed to be learning. The previous research also found that although teachers typically began their lessons with some discussion of the curriculum content of the lesson (that is, of what students would be doing in the lesson), they rarely addressed in any detail what they regarded as the central ideas or concepts that they wanted students to learn, or why that learning mattered. In addition, while many teachers began their lessons with a reminder of what had happened in the previous lesson, few built systematically and cumulatively on learning from previous lessons.

A focus in the *Classrooms of Possibility* research, therefore, was the extent to which teachers succeeded in clarifying purposes for learning within units and lessons, and the extent to which these were shared with students. As indicated in the discussion of analysis of lessons (Section 3 of this report), some lessons in the research schools, were consistently strong in their focus on purposes for learning, but others were more uneven.

Despite some unevenness, many lessons in the research schools provided clear examples of how teachers addressed the issue of clarifying and sharing purposes of learning.

In a Year 4 Science and Technology Unit, for example, teachers typically began lessons by reminding students about the importance of learning to think and write like scientists, and of being able to follow scientific procedures of **predicting, planning and conducting an investigation**. Teachers also reviewed learning of previous lessons; connected that learning with specific scientific skills; and pointed forward to what students would be doing in the current lesson. In the wrap up stage of lessons, teachers encouraged students to reflect on what they had learned, and to link this learning back to the purposes of the lesson and the unit.

In both a Year 5 Geography program, and a Year 7 English program, lessons began with a systematic discussion of lesson goals and success criteria. Importantly, lesson goals and success criteria were not simply stated - they also generated extensive discussion of key terms; and the strategy of Think, Pair, Share was often employed to ensure students had opportunities to discuss their understanding with partners before sharing with the class. Students were asked to summarise and rephrase lesson goals and success criteria in their own words. In the wrap up stage of lessons, students revisited lesson goal and success criteria to reflect on their learning during the lesson.

Classroom discussions of this kind can seem overly time consuming, especially when there is pressure 'to get through the curriculum'. However, teachers in the research made the point that time spent framing units and lessons through discussion of learning purposes was time that was well spent. When students, including those from refugee backgrounds, understood why they were doing tasks, they were more engaged, and they had a clearer sense of the significance of this learning. Teachers also made the point that to identify key learning concepts in a program, they themselves needed to be clear about what learning they wanted their students to take from a unit, and why that learning mattered.

In sum, in regard to clarifying purposes and significance of learning, the research highlighted the importance for teachers of:

- clarifying for themselves the purposes for students' learning at the level of units and lessons;
- articulating learning goals during the process of planning units and lessons, and then sharing these goals (and success criteria) with students;

- discussing with students the purposes of individual tasks, and linking these to purposes of unit and lesson;
- reflecting with students on what they have learned and how this learning relates to broader purposes of units and programs.

Planning and implementing high challenge programs

As indicated, the *Classrooms of Possibility* research, was informed by the assumption that all students, including those from a refugee background, require access to the full school curriculum. In line with many other educators, the research team took the view that is it 'better to set the same high expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations'. (ACARA, 2009:8)

Outcomes from the earlier research (Hammond, 2014a) had shown that while students from refugee backgrounds in mainstream classes generally had access to curriculum concepts that were challenging and demanding, many had difficulty understanding those concepts. While there was evidence of deep knowledge in their programs, there was little consistent evidence of students' deep understanding. A key aim of this research therefore was to work with teachers to plan and implement programs that challenged students from refugee backgrounds; but that also supported them to participate, with other students, in full mainstream programs.

High challenge programs

The research drew on the NSW Quality Teaching model to define high challenge. As discussed in previous sections of this report, the NSW Quality Teaching model defines the Dimension of Intellectual Quality in terms of Elements that include **Deep Knowledge, Deep Understanding, Critical Thinking** and **Substantive Communication**. Our practical working definition of high challenge was that if the elements of Deep Knowledge, Deep Understanding and Substantive Communication were observable within a program, then that program could be characterised as high challenge.

In planning high challenge programs, researchers and teachers together worked with the concepts of **Essential Questions** (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and **Rich Tasks** (New Basics, 2010). Essential Questions identify key knowledge constructs within the curriculum, and consequently ask questions about which knowledge is important for students to learn and why that learning matters. Rich Tasks are problem-based educational tasks that have substantial intellectual value and are designed to have a relevance beyond the classroom. While not new, and not uniquely relevant to the education of refugee background students, these tools were very useful in planning high challenge programs.

Examples of Essential Questions and Rich Tasks that were developed by research teachers are summarized below.

Essential Questions and Rich Tasks in research school programs

	Year 4 Geography: Places in the Australian Continent are Similar and Different	Year 10 Science: Electricity
Essential Questions	• How do people's perceptions impact on the protection of places? • How and why do people perceive places differently? • How do people's perceptions impact on the protection of places in Australia (sacred sites; national parks; world heritage sites)?	• How does electricity get to our homes? • How is electricity generated? • How is it transferred to school?
Rich Tasks	Given the limited money and resources available for protection of important sites, how can you decide which sites should be protected? • Based on your group research into different sites in Australia, which site would you select for protection? How would your group justify that decision? • With your group, write an information report about your selected site and explain why it should be protected.	The school principal has sent a message to the class to say that the electricity bill for the school is excessive. He is asking for help from the class. To assist the principal, you will need to: • identify where most electricity is being used (lights, heating, air-conditioning, students recharging their mobile phones) • suggest ways in which the school electricity bill can be reduced.

Engaging students from refugee backgrounds in high challenge programs

As indicated, the research investigated the question of how realistic it was to expect students from refugee backgrounds to participate with their English-speaking peers in high challenge programs. Teachers took the view that unless students were able to engage with tasks and key concepts, then a high challenge program would be beyond their capabilities, and essentially a waste of time and effort on the part of teachers and students. Teachers also took the view that they needed to acknowledge students' current understandings and skills in the way they sequenced tasks, but they also needed to aim beyond current understandings, and work systematically to build deeper knowledge. They therefore sequenced tasks within Units, and within lessons, to provide high levels of support and to ensure that students' learning could progress in small steps. For the refugee background students this meant they had opportunities to build necessary skills and conceptual knowledge, so that in later lessons, along with others in the class, they had the necessary knowledge base to engage with more cognitively demanding tasks.

It is important to note that while programs as a whole were designed to be intellectually and cognitively challenging, not every individual task within the programs was a high challenge task. Teachers retained the same overall high expectations for all students, including those from refugee backgrounds, but in planning and implementing their programs they were mindful of building from students' existing knowledge and abilities.

In sum, in regard to planning and implementing high challenge programs, the research highlighted the importance of:

- maintaining high expectations of all students, including those from refugee backgrounds;
- designing programs that:
  - ask serious questions about the purposes and significance of studying specific curriculum subjects of History, Science, Geography (that is, identify Essential Questions);
  - build students' understanding of key curriculum concepts in relation to their understanding of the purposes of the subject, and the purposes of specific units of work;
  - require students to use their developing field knowledge to think like filmmakers, geographers, scientists or historians, and then require students to transform that knowledge in order to complete cognitively challenging tasks (such as Rich Tasks);
  - sequence tasks in ways that acknowledge students' current understandings, but that aim beyond this – and that encourage students to question, analyse and think critically about what they are learning.

Planning and implementing high support programs

For refugee background students, access to high challenge programs was dependent on access to high levels of support. Thus a major focus of the *Classrooms of Possibility* research was how to plan and implement programs that provided students with the targeted and differentiated support necessary to address their specific needs.

In planning and implementing high support programs, the research team worked with concepts of Designed-in and Contingent scaffolding and message abundancy (see Gibbons, 2009; 2015; Hammond, 2014a; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005 for further explanations of these concepts). These concepts are not new and are certainly not unique to the education of refugee background students, but they assisted teachers to plan and implement programs that were inclusive; that supported students to build necessary skills; and enabled students gradually to become more independent as learners.

The following year 5 History program provides an example of how teachers worked with these concepts, and of what high support programs, that also incorporated the principle of high challenge, looked like in practice.

The Year 5 class was engaged in a History unit on Colonial Australia. As part of the unit, students learned about the gold rushes and the Eureka Stockade.

> *In one lesson, students were introduced to events of the Eureka Stockade via a shared book reading about the Eureka Stockade; they then undertook a shared oral reconstruction of the events outlined in the book. At this point students had just begun to learn about the Eureka Stockade and their reconstruction of events required a high level of teacher scaffolding. Here teachers' contingent, or point of need, scaffolding was targeted to individual students' needs. Then the next task required students to sequence pictures from the Eureka Stockade book, and so was designed to revisit the same curriculum content again.*

The structure of the lesson, with its **Designed-in and Contingent Scaffolding**, enabled students to visit and revisit key curriculum concepts (of events and significance of the Eureka Stockade), but in each consecutive task, students worked slightly more independently. The **message abundancy** that was designed into the sequence of tasks, provided time for students to engage with key concepts, while also becoming familiar with the language required to understand and talk about the concepts. The curriculum concepts (of rebellion and injustices) in the unit were quite challenging, but the design and sequence of tasks made it possible for students to begin to engage with those concepts.

> *As students moved from oral reconstruction to the picture sequencing task, the class teacher explained the task that students were about to do; she checked understanding of key vocabulary; she repeated the instructions; students confirmed their understanding, and one student explained the instructions in his own words.*

For refugee background students who were adjusting to educational practices of Australian classrooms, and who were also learning English, it was often difficult to understand task requirements. The kind of detailed instructions evident in the history lesson ensured all students, including those of refugee background, understood the nature and purpose of the task they were about to do.

> *Following the picture-sequencing task, students worked in groups to complete a pro-forma that summarised positive and negative outcomes from the Eureka Stockade. The pro-forma also asked students to give an opinion on whether the Eureka Stockade was necessary. This task required students to transfer knowledge from sequences of historical events to conclusions regarding the significance of these events.*

This was a challenging task. As students worked on the pro-forma task, teachers supported them to reflect on historical events, and to draw their own conclusions regarding the outcomes, and the necessity, of the Eureka Stockade. Students were supported to build their knowledge of curriculum concepts and to draw conclusions prior to writing. In addition, students of mixed literacy abilities were deliberately grouped together. This meant that, in addition to support provided by teachers, students with stronger literacy abilities were able to assist others. As a result, all students, including those of refugee background were able to participate in this quite challenging task.

> *The lesson included a systematic review of key vocabulary items that had been introduced in the lesson. The review of vocabulary that occurred in this lesson was a regular and systematic component of lessons in the History unit. It highlighted important vocabulary items and enabled students to become familiar, and gradually to begin using, these key words independently.*

For refugee background students, the scaffolding and message abundancy that was evident in this and other lessons within the history program provided the necessary support for students to engage with new educational concepts, and it also provided time and opportunities to learn the English language that enabled students to talk about these concepts.

Similar features were evident in a Year 7 English unit on Film Appreciation where students investigated questions about what makes a good film, and how knowledge of film techniques

enables us to think more critically about films. Lessons in the unit were characterised by very clear task instructions; careful sequencing of tasks to engage students in sequences of modelled, guided and independent learning; regular checking of students' understanding; and support for vocabulary development. For refugee background students, the careful pacing, the explicit task instructions, and the level of support within the unit ensured all students knew what was expected of them. It also provided sufficient message abundancy and scaffolding to enable them to complete tasks successfully. Although students were learning about quite complex concepts related to film techniques, the tasks were accessible to all students.

In sum, high support programs within our research were characterised by the following features:

- recognising where students 'are at' in terms of their current knowledge and English language proficiency, and building programs from there;
- selecting and sequencing of tasks to design-in high levels of support and enable students gradually to build understanding of curriculum language, concepts and skills;
- purposeful shifts between whole class and group activities so that different levels of support can be provided to specific students as needed;
- access to message abundancy through opportunities to visit and revisit similar curriculum language and concepts via whole class, group, and pair work;
- sequencing of tasks to build in 'handover' so students became increasingly independent as learners;
- providing Contingent support at the point of need in order to make the most of the 'teachable moment';
- providing clear and explicit task instructions, and checking students' understanding;
- ongoing support for language and literacy development, including support for specialised vocabulary development, that is embedded within curriculum programs.

Talking to learn and learning to talk (and read and write) academic English

A further factor that was closely related to the principles of high challenge and high support was highlighted in the *Classrooms of Possibility* research. This was the importance of providing students with opportunities to talk to learn.

The significance of talk in learning has been acknowledged by researchers and educators for many years (Alexander 2008; Wells, 1999; Skidmore, 2006; Mercer, Dawes & Kleine Staarman, 2009; Myhill 2006). The argument here is that opportunities for students to engage in sustained and in depth talk about substantial curriculum knowledge are pivotal to their development of higher mental processes and deep learning. This argument is acknowledged in the NSW Quality Teaching model in the element of Substantive Communication.

While the research team fully acknowledged the importance of talking to learn, there were particular challenges here for students of refugee background. In order to engage in sustained and in-depth talk, students also had to learn the academic English that enabled them to talk, and they had to develop the confidence to talk in front of others. For refugee background students, talking to learn also involved learning to talk (and read and write) academic English.

Teachers in the research deliberately **designed-in** opportunities for students, including those from refugee backgrounds, to talk to learn. The following Year 4 Science and Technology Unit, provides an example of how this was done.

The Unit aimed to build students' understandings of **key scientific concepts** (of the impact of heat on different materials), while also supporting their oral English development, and their ability to write scientific reports. Lessons within the Unit were planned to provide students with multiple opportunities to talk in whole-class discussions; in pairs; and in groups.

> *In one lesson, students undertook an experiment that involved placing four objects - a bamboo skewer, a plastic straw, a metal spoon and a plastic spoon - into a glass beaker. A dab of butter was used to stick a small bead onto the end of each of these objects. Then boiling water was poured into the beaker, and students observed which bead fell off which object first. Teachers first demonstrated the experiment. As students watched the demonstration, teachers encouraged them to talk about what they observed.*

Teachers also mediated the language of students' responses by modelling use of scientific language, and by recasting and elaborating students' responses; by pushing students to articulate statements in more detail; and by clarifying the meaning of key terms. As a result, students were encouraged to talk to clarify understandings and also to begin using scientific language. They were also encouraged to speculate, and to hypothesise about scientific concepts.

> *Following demonstration of the experiment, students worked in groups to undertake their own experiment.*

As students interacted with their peers, their language was accompanied by the actions of doing the experiment. The prior demonstration ensured they were familiar with the procedures of the experiment, so their language interactions here enabled them to review and consolidate learning, to clarify understandings, and to practice using scientific English.

> *After completing the experiment, students regrouped on the floor to discuss outcomes from their experiment.*

As the discussion proceeded, teachers encouraged students to use their developing language of science (hypothesise, observe) to share observations from their experiments. But in addition, they shifted the class discussion from **what** to **why** questions, (*Why did the bead get stuck on the wooden skewer?*). This was an important shift as it asked students to generalise from what they observed in their experiments and to draw scientific conclusions about good and poor conductors of heat. It also made explicit links between the experiment and the broader purpose of the unit (to investigate the impact of heat on different materials). It therefore pushed students to 'think and talk scientifically'.

Teachers in the high schools also designed in opportunities for their students to 'talk to learn'. In a Year 7 English Unit on Film techniques, for example, students interviewed two visitors to their classroom who were professional video makers. Prior to the interviews, students worked in groups to refine questions that they wanted to ask of these visitors. With teacher support, these group discussions enabled students to clarify what they wanted to find out in the interviews, to focus their questions, and to practice the language of their questions. So later, when they engaged in 'public' discussions, they had the confidence to participate actively with the class visitors.

Opportunities for students to **talk-to-learn** do not happen by accident, and in both primary and high school programs were deliberately designed into sequences of lessons. They included whole class, pair and group discussions, and they were designed to provide students initially

with high levels of mediation and support, but then to became more open-ended and more exploratory. For refugee background students, these opportunities were important: they enabled students to visit and revisit concepts; they provided opportunities for students to hear and practice their use of English; and they provided time for students to clarify and deepen their understandings. They also enabled students to engage in genuinely exploratory discussions and to participate actively in the construction of knowledge.

Importantly, teachers in the research also built in opportunities for their students to learn relevant aspects of academic English. They recognised that while opportunities to **practice using** academic English were valuable, they were not enough - especially for students from refugee backgrounds; and that if students were to participate in substantive conversations about complex curriculum concepts, they needed support to **learn about** relevant texts and grammar of academic English.

The Year 4 Science and Technology Unit illustrates how teachers in the research embedded the teaching of academic English within their program, and how they worked with students to build their knowledge of academic English.

In line with the overall unit goal of learning to think and write like scientists, teachers identified a text type relevant to the curriculum content (in this case, procedural recounts). They first contextualised the purpose of procedural recounts in relation to the broader purposes of the unit (of thinking and writing like scientists), and in relation to the work that students had completed on good and poor conductors of heat. Students reviewed the structure and purpose of each stage of procedural recounts, and then worked with partners to 'reconstruct' a model of the text that had been cut into sentences. This model was based on outcomes from students' earlier experiments, so the work on structure and purpose of procedural recounts built on field knowledge that was already familiar to students. In subsequent lessons, students worked from their knowledge of text structure to address details of grammar, including the role of noun groups, verb groups and adverbial phrases in procedural recounts.

For refugee background students, this kind of explicit teaching of language and literacy contributed to their ability to begin 'thinking and writing like scientists'. It also helped them become more aware their own and others' use of English, and to develop analytic abilities that could be transported to other curriculum areas, and other learning contexts.

In sum, the research highlighted the importance both of talking to learn and learning to talk (and read and write) academic English in the education of students from refugee backgrounds. Specifically, it highlighted the importance of:

- designing-in opportunities within programs for students to talk for different purposes, including:
  - to review and build cumulatively on prior learning;
  - to visit and revisit key concepts;
  - to explore and hypothesise, to clarify thinking, and to extend understandings;
  - to summarise, generalise and transform knowledge;
  - to prepare for academic writing;
- introducing students to subject specific academic language through modelling and through opportunities to begin using the language;
- embedding the explicit teaching of academic English in all subject areas by:
  - identifying program goals to address aspects of language and literacy relevant to curriculum content;

- identifying spoken and written texts relevant to curriculum content within programs, and explicit teaching of language features relevant to those texts, including text organisation and structure, sentence grammar, spelling and punctuation;
- teaching of subject specific vocabulary.

6. Recommendations from the research

Recommendation 1

High quality learning environments for refugee background students in mainstream classes

That schools and teachers build on findings from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research to meet the needs of their refugee background students in mainstream classes by addressing the following factors in their processes of program planning and teaching:

Positive learning environments that are characterised by:

- supportive environments at both school and classroom levels, where students and their families feel welcomed, valued and safe; and where high priority is attached to students' wellbeing;
- supportive and respectful relationships with teacher(s) and other students;
- predictable learning environments that include reinforcement of clear routines within lessons, and firm and consistent classroom management;
- consistent, positive feedback to students on values and behaviour and also on their progress in learning; (ie reinforcement of how to 'do class/ school' and of how to be a 'successful' student).

Collaborative program planning where:

- school structures facilitate and enable collaborative planning over periods of time, with particular emphasis on:
  - sharing relevant information about students to assist all teachers to know their students;
  - time for class/ subject and EAL/D teachers to meet and work collaboratively;
  - opportunities for EAL/D teachers to take an active role in the collaborative planning process;
- clear guidelines for program planning facilitate:
  - analysis of students' strengths and needs, and analysis of curriculum demands;
  - clarification of learning goals (of units and lessons);
  - planning for high challenge and high support;
  - opportunities for teacher reflection, and evaluation of effectiveness of programs.

Programs with **clear purposes for learning** that are shared with students, and where teachers:

- clarify for themselves the purposes for students' learning at the level of Units and lessons;
- articulate Learning Goals during the process of planning Units and lessons, and then share these Goals (and Success Criteria) with students;
- discuss with students the purposes of individual tasks, and link these to purposes of Unit and lesson;
- reflect with students on what they have learned and how this learning relates to broader purposes of units and programs.

High challenge programs, where teachers:

- maintain high expectations of all students, including those from refugee backgrounds;
- design programs that:
  - ask serious questions about the purposes and significance of studying specific curriculum subjects such as History, Science, Geography;

- build students' understanding of key curriculum concepts in relation to their understanding of the purposes of the subject, and the purposes of specific units of work;
- require students to use their developing field knowledge to think like geographers, or scientists or historians, and then require students to transform that knowledge in order to complete cognitively challenging tasks;
- sequence tasks in ways that acknowledge students' current understandings, but that aim beyond this – and that encourage students to question, analyse and think critically about what they are learning.

High support programs, where teachers:

- recognise where students 'are at' in terms of their current knowledge and English language proficiency, and build programs from there;
- select and sequence tasks to 'design-in' high levels of support and enable students gradually to build understanding of curriculum language, concepts and skills;
- include purposeful shifts between whole class and group activities so that different levels of support can be provided to specific students as needed;
- ensure students have access to message abundancy through opportunities to visit and revisit similar curriculum language and concepts via whole class, group, and pair work;
- sequence tasks to build in handover so students became increasingly independent as learners;
- provide contingent support at the point of need in order to make the most of the 'teachable moment';
- provide clear and explicit task instructions, and check students' understanding;
- provide ongoing support for language and literacy development, including support for specialised vocabulary development, that is embedded within curriculum programs.

Programs where students have opportunities **to talk to learn and to learn to talk** (and read and write) academic English, and where teachers:

- design-in opportunities within programs for students to talk for different purposes, including
    - to review and build cumulatively on prior learning;
    - to visit and revisit key concepts and language;
    - to explore and hypothesise, to clarify thinking, and to extend understandings
    - to summarise, generalise and transform knowledge;
    - to prepare for academic writing;
- introduce students to subject specific academic language through modelling and through opportunities to begin using the language;
- embed the explicit teaching of academic English in all subject areas by:
    - identifying program goals to address aspects of language and literacy relevant to curriculum content;
    - identifying spoken and written texts relevant to curriculum content within programs, and explicit teaching of language features relevant to those texts, including text organisation and structure, sentence grammar, spelling and punctuation;
    - teaching of subject specific vocabulary.

Recommendation 2

Questions to guide program planning and reflection

That, when planning and implementing programs for refugee background students in mainstream classes, teachers work with the *Questions to guide program planning and reflection* that are provided in Appendix B of this report.

Recommendation 3

Professional learning and support for teachers

That schools provide mainstream teachers with access to professional learning and support to assist them understand and meet the specific need of their refugee background students within mainstream classes. As part of this professional learning and support, schools work with videos and professional learning resources developed from the *Classrooms of Possibility* research project.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

1. Interview questions for school executive staff (primary and high school)

What has been your school's experience with students of refugee background?

- Numbers of students?
- Major languages and cultures of these students?
- Once students join mainstream classes, what are their major challenges and what are their successes?

What programs or resources have been put in place in your school to support students of refugee background?

- The nature of programs/resources
- Why these particular programs/resources?
- Their major successes?
- Ongoing challenges with programs/resources?

What are greatest challenges and successes in education of students from refugee background in your school?

- Specific needs of students?
- Support for teachers (eg smaller classes, professional support)?
- Specific teaching approaches and strategies?
- Other?

In your view, what would further assist teachers in their work with students from refugee backgrounds within mainstream classes?

2. Initial interviews with teachers (at primary and high school)

Your role in the school

- What are your major responsibilities in the school?
- In what ways do you work with students of refugee background?
- Have you had prior experience in working with refugee students? If so, can you describe this?

Your perceptions of students of refugee background and their educational progress

- Who are the refugee students you work with?
- What do you see as the major challenges faced by students when they first join mainstream classes?
- What kinds of expectations do you have of their educational outcomes?

Your perceptions of the available student support

- Can you describe the specific programs/resources available in your school for students of refugee background?
    - Are you involved with these programs/resources?
    - In your view, how effective are they?
    - What are the most and least useful aspects of these programs for students?

Your approach to teaching and learning practices with students of refugee background

- Can you describe your approach to teaching students of refugee background in your class?
- What do you regard as major priorities in the education of students of refugee background?
- To what extent and how does the presence of these students in your class impact on your program planning?
- To what extent and how does their presence impact on your teaching?
- What are the greatest challenges for you (and other teachers) in your work with students of refugee background?
- What are your successes?
- Can you describe one or two examples from recent lessons of how you approach the teaching of students of refugee background in your class?

Your views on available support for teachers

- Is there any specific support available for teachers in your school who are working with refugee students (either at school or system level)? Is so, can you describe this?
- How effective is this support? What are the most and least useful aspects of the support?
- Have you had access to EAL professional development programs?
    - Do you have EAL qualifications?
    - Have you had access to EAL professional learning (eg TELL)?
- Do you draw on resources available in the Australian Curriculum and/or ACARA in your work with students of refugee background? If so, to what extent and how?
- What, if any, other support do you think would help you in your work with students of refugee background?

3. Final interviews with teachers

About program planning processes

- How do you go about planning programs (across whole of year?) And how do you refine the program for the needs of your students?
- To what extent are you conscious of your refugee students: what are their specific needs and how do you accommodate these while also addressing needs of other students?
- What are the benefits of working together in program planning?
- How important is having time for planning? (and how does your school support this?)
- What are your views on the benefits of different models of EAL/D support within your school? (ie withdrawal/parallel classes vs team teaching?)
- Which (if any) specific tools have you found particularly useful when planning your program: Essential Questions, Rich Tasks; notions of scaffolding, message abundancy etc.

About lessons

- How tightly do you plan lessons (and how do you decide which teacher does what in the lessons?
- How did you select and sequence tasks in the lessons we have observed?
- How consciously do you build in opportunities for students to talk to learn? And how is this evident in your lessons?
- How did you 'build in' work towards the Rich Tasks (and what is your experience of working with Rich Tasks – if this was the first time – would you use them again?)
- To what extent do you consciously plan to enable students to talk to learn?

About teaching of English language and literacy

- Which aspects of language and literacy do you deliberately include in units such as the one you are teaching?
- How do you decide what to teach and when/how to teach it?
- How difficult is it to do this, and what has helped?

Advice to other teachers working with refugee students

- What do you think are the greatest priorities when working with refugee students?
- What do you think teachers need to know in order to address these?
- How was all of this evident in the lessons we have been observing?
- What advice would you offer to other teachers generally, and what advice would you offer specifically about including systematic and explicit teaching of language and literacy?

Reflections on impact of this project

- What impact if any has this project had on your thinking and teaching of refugee students/ has the program planning process pushed you to do/ plan/ think about anything you weren't already doing?
- What has been most/ least useful for you?
- What, if any, long term impact do you think the project might have on your thinking, planning for and teaching of refugee students?
- What could most usefully be used to support other teachers; and in what kinds of professional development?
- What kind of outcomes from the project would be most useful to you and others?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Questions to guide program planning and reflection

Focus of program	Guiding questions
Initial analysis and information gathering	What do you know about your students and what else do you need to know?
Analysing students' needs (knowing your students)	What do you know about students' backgrounds prior to, and since, arriving in Australia? • Family/ community structure within Australia, and students' responsibilities within family? • Health and welfare of students? • Prior educational experiences? • Literacy in L1? How will you assess the specific educational needs of students? • Language and literacy abilities in English? • Relevant background knowledge? • Relevant curriculum knowledge?
Analysing curriculum demands	How will you identify the demands of the curriculum: • of curriculum content? • of specific English language requirements?
Establishing purposes for learning	How will you decide on program goals (for both curriculum content and English language/ literacy); If you are working with Essential Questions, what are these likely to be and how will they relate to the program goals? Where and how will you share purposes for learning with your students?
Addressing high challenge	How will you plan for programs that are characterised by high intellectual challenge? Will you include a Rich Task, and if so, what might that look like?
Ensuring high support for both curriculum content and language/ literacy development	How will you plan programs that provide the support all students need to participate successfully? How will you select and sequence tasks? • What 'tools' might help here and how (eg EAL framework; mode continuum; aspects of scaffolding)? How will you plan for differentiated support within your program? • Will this be associated with group tasks? • If so, how will these tasks relate to the goals/ Essential Questions/ Rich Task? How will you embed support for students' language and literacy development within your program?

Assessing for learning	How will you monitor your students' learning?
	• Will this be built into the design of your program?
	• If so, how?
	How will you evaluate the overall effectiveness of your program?
	How will you know if your program 'worked'?
	What processes will enable you to reflect on and if necessary modify your program for future teaching?