

## **Educational expectations of Bhutanese refugee parents:**

**Have they been met post-settlement in Cairns, Far North Queensland**

By:

Debbie Lau  
[debbie.lau@outlook.com](mailto:debbie.lau@outlook.com)

and

Dr Philemon Chigeza  
School of Education  
James Cook University  
[Philemon.Chigeza@jcu.edu.au](mailto:Philemon.Chigeza@jcu.edu.au)  
(07) 4042 1542

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***Educational expectations of Bhutanese refugee parents:  
Have they been met post-settlement in Cairns, Far North Queensland?***

*Abstract*

In the 1980s religious and ethnic persecution in Bhutan resulted in the exodus of around 100 000 Bhutanese of ethnic Nepali descent. Despite sometimes appalling conditions in the camps, the Bhutanese refugees saw education as a high priority and initiated programs that ensured their children were schooled (Caritas, 2013). Against this context, a qualitative case study was conducted to explore some of the Bhutanese refugee parents' educational expectations prior to and post settlement in Cairns, Far North Queensland. Interviews were conducted with Bhutanese families and migrant settlement case workers. The study reveals that Bhutanese refugee parents held high expectation that their children would attend high school upon resettlement in Australia. The study also reveals that some Bhutanese refugee young people were denied enrolment to high school because of their age. The study identified the existence of cultural and intergenerational tensions with post-settlement educational expectations. The article discusses how the lack of knowledge and cultural differences between Australian and Bhutanese/Nepalese education systems, undoubtedly contributed to some parents' educational expectations not being met. Finally the article recommends a greater level of transparency in the education enrolment process to mitigate potential misperceptions in enrolment eligibility.

*Background*

Australian society is becoming increasingly diverse, with a wide representation of its population coming from refugee backgrounds. The experiences of refugees are distinctly unique to the individual and it is not our intention to homogenise their representation. It can be argued, however, that there is commonality in the experiences of forced migration from their original homelands due to persecution and/or war (United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees [UNHCR], 1977). A refugee is a person who is forced to leave their home country, due to fear of persecution for "reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (UNHCR, 1977, para. 1). Refugees fleeing their home countries due to fear of persecution may well have experienced life-threatening situations. Resettlement in a new country provides an opportunity for refugees to create a new and secure life, and a better future for themselves and their families, in a new country.

Between July 2012 and June 2013 Australia, under the Humanitarian Program, granted 20 019 visas; of which 60 per cent were classed as refugee visas (Department of Immigration and

Citizenship [DIAC], 2013). Some of these humanitarian entrants were, and continue to be, relocated to regional areas such as Cairns, Far North Queensland (DIAC, 2014). Cairns began receiving humanitarian entrants in 1987 (Cairns Regional Council, n.d.) and continues to settle refugees into their community. The 2010-2011 financial year saw 159 refugees settled in Cairns, accounting for 14% of Queensland's new humanitarian entrants (Kulan & Crase, 2011). One of the principal emerging communities within the Cairns region is the Bhutanese community. To date, 4190 refugees have been resettled in Australia (Gurung, 2013) with an estimated 450 making Cairns their home (Cairns Regional Council, 2012).

One impact of Australia's changing demographics can be seen within our schools. Maintaining social cohesion and diversity whilst supporting student settlement and ensuring academic success is a complex issue (Matthews, 2008). Given the 2012 White Paper, Australia in the Asian Century, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012) advocating for every child in Australia to receive an education, regardless of their location or background, this article endeavours to explore how these initiatives were implemented within the context of Cairns. Specifically, how Bhutanese children with refugee backgrounds had engaged in the education system and the repercussions on parental expectations.

### *Refugee Situation*

It is important to note that Australian data on refugee youth humanitarian entrants replicate the global trends highlighted by UNHCR (2012), where a significant percentage "of refugee-humanitarian migrants arrive in Australia as children or young adults" (Hugo, 2011, p. 64). Between July 2012 and June 2013, 39.2 % of refugee entrants granted visas were 17 years and under (DIAC, 2013). It is widely documented that youths, in particular, face complex challenges distinctive to that demographic during the process of transition and third country resettlement (see for example Olliff & Mohamed 2007; Correa-Velez, Gillford, & Barnett, 2010).

Extreme stress and psychological pressures are commonly experienced by young people in the process of fleeing their home countries (Correa-Valez et al., 2010). A number of "studies have consistently highlighted an increased prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety among young refugees" (Cameron, Frydenberg & Jackson, 2011, p. 46). Whilst still trying to recover from physical and/or emotional traumas experienced in displacement camps, young people with refugee backgrounds are simultaneously faced with the complexities of adjusting to a new life and identity in a new country (Olliff & Mohamed 2007). These young people struggle to re-establish their role within their family, cultural group, and wider community (Olliff & Mohamed 2007). They also struggle to navigate through new social and cultural contexts such as school and peer groups

(O'Sullivan & Olliff, 2006). It is reasonable to assume that these complexities apply to the Bhutanese youths who have settled in Cairns.

Successful resettlement is invariably dependent on the individual's personal and social circumstances, with each individual negotiating the process uniquely (Correa-Valez et al., 2010). Social environment and social inclusivity are key determinants in positive resettlement for refugees (O'Sullivan & Olliff, 2006). Active participation and involvement within economic, social, and civic realms in the early phases of resettlement can facilitate and strengthen a sense of belonging to the community (Hugo, 2011; O'Sullivan & Olliff, 2006). For young people with refugee backgrounds, participation in school and receiving an education play a significant role in the resettlement process (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2009). Accordingly, it would be expected that for Bhutanese youths in the Cairns community, active participation within the school community would be beneficial.

Acknowledging that the contributing factors in facilitating positive settlement and wellbeing are complex and diverse, there is extensive research which maintains education is a key instrumental factor within this process (see for example Matthews, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011; RCOA, 2009). Taking this into account, it can be argued that for young people with refugee backgrounds, engaging in the school experience and having access to education are fundamental aspects to their wellbeing and successful establishment in their new country.

The experience of a person faced with forced migration is profoundly different from those of a person who chooses migration (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011). However, it is only in recent decades that Australian policy and research has acknowledged this distinction (Matthews, 2008). Taylor and Sidhu (2011) suggest that the trend towards combining migrants and refugees into one group has been mirrored in policy and research. This has resulted in a "lack of targeted policies and organisational frameworks to address the significant educational disadvantages confronting refugee youths" (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011, p. 4). Australian education institutions have attempted to address the complex social and educational issues faced by refugee youths, in regard to both social inclusion and successful educational outcomes. However, research indicates that there appears to be an absence of directed strategy for these young people, resulting in significant learning barriers for them (Keddie, 2012; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011).

Indeed, Education Queensland does not seem to have an education policy to address the specific educational needs of children with refugee backgrounds. With a lack of these resources, support and professional development, Australian teachers report that they feel unprepared to meet the demands and complex needs of refugee youths (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009). It is reasonable to suggest that these findings are applicable to the Bhutanese young people in Cairns, who would be confronted by similar barriers and disadvantages within the school.

The apparent absences in the delivery of culturally appropriate education to youths with refugee backgrounds is compounded by the limited cultural capital these young people possess (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010). Ferfolja and Vickers (2010) argue that the 'hegemonic nature' of schools inherently prejudice the dominant culture by reflecting the values and social norms of white, middle-class Australia. Individuals on the fringe of the dominant culture are expected to adapt and conform to the social, educational, and cultural expectations imposed by the dominant Anglo-Celtic Australian culture (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010). Young people with refugee backgrounds, like the Bhutanese youth in Cairns, struggle with adjusting and integrating into this unfamiliar environment (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010).

As argued previously, schools can provide a stable environment and enable a sense of belonging for young refugees (Matthews, 2008; Taylor & Sidhu, 2011), thus any constraints on this support are concerning. While research demonstrates the importance of a school experience for youths with refugee backgrounds, it also suggests that a hegemonic school environment could be a significant obstacle to creating a sense of belonging for these young people.

### *Methodology*

This project sought to answer the overarching question 'How did the educational expectations of Bhutanese parents with refugee backgrounds manifest in reality?' The interpretive approach adopted for this study is framed within a constructivist paradigm. It attempted to explore the educational expectations of Bhutanese refugee parents before and after settling in Australia. The project attempted to explore how those expectations have been met and whether their aspirations for their children's education have changed since settlement in Cairns, Far North Queensland.

Within the guidelines of an exploratory case study (Yin, 1993), interviews and informal conversations were conducted over the first six months of 2012 with a total of seven participants. This sample of participants included three Bhutanese refugee parents, two migrant settlement case workers, one Bhutanese bi-cultural worker, and one English language teacher. Thematic coding was employed to systematically interpret and identify emergent themes (Creswell, 2008). The following sections focus on the overriding themes that arose from the interviews and conversations.

### *What we learnt from the study*

Education in the Nepalese refugee camps, although limited in resources, maintained regular attendance by pupils from kindergarten to high school and is considered by the United Nations as one of the better refugee education programs (Brown, 2001; Caritas, 2013). "Bhutanese refugees have appreciated the importance of quality education; both for the

individual and the community ... [they] regard education as their only wealth in exile and their key to the future" (Brown, 2001, p. 138). The parents in this study wanted the best for their children. They wanted their children to be successful and recognised that education was the cornerstone if there was to be any prospect for future success.

#### *Life in refugee camps for many years*

The interviews revealed that although each parent and their family's experiences were unique, they all provided distressing insights into the traumas of having to live in a refugee camp for many years. One parent retold how his son had been kidnapped from the refugee camp, resulting in the disengagement from school, of a very bright and able young man. Another recalled how life in a Nepalese refugee camp for over 20 years was "harsh [and] very dangerous." Consequently, this parent believed strongly that Australia would provide the best opportunities for his family, stating that "the main reason to resettle in Australia was to get a better life and a better education for the children". He hoped his children would "get a quality education here." Likewise, another parent emphasised that "education for the children, is really important" and that his "main hope for [his] children is (...) they should get the formal educations." It was recognised by all parents that without 'formal' education (high school including TAFE and University), their children would be unable to get a 'good' job.

The parents commented that attendance at camp schools afforded children a degree of routine and normality, in an otherwise unstable and at times, dangerous life. Despite their harsh existence in the refugee camps, these parents all stressed the importance of attending school and obtaining an education. It was evident that the prospect of resettlement in Australia meant the opportunity for their children to access quality education; and with this, the promise of an improved life.

#### *Education as an avenue to a successful future*

The prevailing message from the findings was that these parents considered education an avenue to a successful future. Notably, O'Sullivan and Olliff (2006) found that with families born outside Australia, "education is often a pathway out of the poverty experienced overseas, and a means by which to help the whole family into the future" (p. 11). These parents echoed this sentiment, with one parent stating there was "no future [for his children], no hope with no school." It appears that educational success, for these parents was important for similar reasons as outlined by O'Sullivan and Olliff (2006). These parents all recognised that 'good jobs' were secured by means of an education.

Further interpretation of the findings indicates that the educational expectations of these Bhutanese parents are implicitly linked to success. There is little doubt that their aspirations are heavily influenced by their cultural values. Clarification from the bi-cultural worker identified that culturally, many Bhutanese view children as a reflection of the parents. Their child's success also establishes a sense of security for the whole family. In Bhutanese culture, the children are expected to take on the responsibility of caring for the parents when they become old. It could be argued that these cultural implications could create added pressure for these youths, who are already faced with multiple stresses and obstacles in achieving success within an unfamiliar education system.

#### *Different perspectives of success*

Tensions within the family also arose from different perspectives of success. The bi-cultural worker noted that for some Bhutanese, being successful in their third country settlement was simply being one step above a refugee existence. It was also emphasised that in most circumstances, parents are illiterate farmers whom are unable to advise their children in suitable educational pathways. As a consequence, the parents' lack of awareness and understanding of the education system and possibilities available in Australia was creating a barrier between some children and their parents.

Another cultural variation, one which created significant angst for these parents, was the age limitation set by the Australian education system. In contrast, the parents' experiences of education meant that students would study at their ability level, regardless of their age. Should, for example, a six year old student in grade one not pass their year one exam, they would not be permitted to progress to grade two.

#### *Denied to enrol in high school*

It was disconcerting, to learn that children from these families had been denied the right to enrol in high school. Although experiences and outcomes with the Australian education system faced by each family varied, all families in this study had at least one of their children denied enrolment into a local high school.

A farmer before fleeing Bhutan, one parent expressed severe disappointment about his son not being able to attend this high school, saying that he has no hope without education. This parent surmised that his children's futures were bleak. He felt that their lives would undoubtedly emulate his own, stating "definitely it will happen like me" (referring to the fact his lack of education has significantly hindered his ability to find and secure work in Australia). It was identified that his son was denied the right to attend high school even though at the time of enrolment he was, according to this parent, 17 years old. Subsequently, his son

began attending English language classes at a local adult educational institute. This parent was extremely dismayed at the missed opportunity for his son to engage in the multiple subject areas offered in high school. He believed that this would limit his future options. Expressing that his expectations for his children's future success had indeed changed since arriving in Australia, he felt that any hope for his children succeeding were gone.

By July 2013, eight families had informed a Cairns Humanitarian Settlement Service (HSS) that their children had been denied enrolment into this local high school. These families had apparently been given various reasons for the denied enrolment, including student ability and age; however there was no conclusive explanation. Documentation from HSS revealed that an advocacy worker met with the high school's representatives and education department officials to discuss this issue. It was outlined that during these discussions, HSS attempted to establish a definitive reason for denying enrolment in this school. HSS were told by school and department officials that various factors contributed to preventing student enrolment. These included student ability, educational outcomes for the school, and lack of funding. However overall, it was due to their age. This lack of transparency in the enrolment process, indeed, compounded the frustrations faced by the parents in this study.

Despite Education Queensland's Inclusive Education Policy Statement (Department of Education, Training, and Employment [DETE], 2013) clearly asserting that "Education Queensland (...) responds constructively to the needs of educationally disadvantaged/marginalised students, (...)ensures that all school community members [are] ... free from discrimination ... [and] promotes locally negotiated responses to student, family and community needs", these students were still denied enrolment. It seemed that since these youths were above the compulsory school age of 16 years, and some youths were already 18 years old, the school did not have to accept their enrolments. Although Education Queensland's guidelines for mature-aged students (DETE, 2012) states that enrolment, as an adult is subject to police checks, prior schooling, and capacity of the school, the policy still suggests that there is a place for adult learners in Queensland Education schools. However, it is also implied that the final determination of enrolment as a mature aged student is at the discretion of the school principal (DETE, 2012).

The school experience can be seen as an essential component for establishing individual wellbeing and facilitates the process of successful resettlement for youths with refugee backgrounds (Matthews, 2008). As Correa-Velez et. al. (2010) stress, "the broader social environment within which [refugee young people] live their lives is crucial for positive reinforcement of being socially valued, of belonging and of being able to participate in and contribute to society" (p. 1406). It is arguable that the Bhutanese young people who were denied enrolment to a high school experienced a form of exclusion from the school system



which, more than likely, impacted negatively on their self-value, sense of belonging, ability to contribute and to realise their full potential.

The effects of denied enrolment to high school had varying consequences on each family and it is difficult to draw conclusions from this study regarding more wide-ranging impacts. It could be argued however, that the immediate repercussions of being denied enrolment into school did cause considerable stress and anxiety to the youths and immediate family members involved. In regards to any changes to their expectations post-settlement, the findings indicate that educational expectations of the Bhutanese parents depend highly on the experiences of the individual.

#### *Lack of knowledge to successfully navigate the Australian education system*

The research findings suggest that the Bhutanese parents did not have the knowledge to successfully navigate the Australian education system. O'Sullivan and Olliff (2006) found migrant "families often report feeling powerless, unsure (...) [and] are sometimes frustrated by not understanding the Australian system of education" (p. 10). Similar findings were also observed in this study. These parents settled in Cairns not realising there could be a potential issue with their children attending school. Two parents, in particular, expressed their confusion and bewilderment when their children were denied enrolment.

Refugees settle in Australia not realising that the education system in the new country may be quite different to the one they left. For parents with children in their late teens, the differences in regard to age requirements for entry to Australian high schools pose a considerable problem. For the three Bhutanese refugee parents highlighted in this study, education for their children appeared to be a primary focus for resettlement. This reflects "the well documented pattern of many refugee-humanitarian groups placing considerable emphasis on their children's education" (Hugo, 2011, p. 143). Moreover, it was observed by Hugo (2011) that amongst humanitarian refugee settlers, there was clear indication that education was strongly emphasised in the next generation of humanitarian entrants. There is also evidence of greater participation in education after high school amongst the second generation of humanitarian entrants, in comparison to those born in Australia (Hugo, 2011).

It is possible that prior knowledge of the education system, and the age limitations they would face in Cairns, would have helped them to readjust their expectations. Whether or not that can be proven, it would seem appropriate to provide as much information as possible to refugees about the education system and options available when settling in Australia. As Sidhu and Taylor (2009) state, "Education is a priority for newly arrived refugee families" (p. 656), an opinion clearly reflected in the interviews with the families in this study.

However, the parents' experiences with the local education system post-settlement in Cairns, impacted significantly on the educational expectations they held for their children.

These parents came with the expectation that their children will attend school and receive a quality education. The findings reveal several cases in which this basic aspiration was denied. The recent White Paper (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012) claims that "all Australians need the opportunity to acquire skills and education in order to fully contribute to and participate in the economy" (p. 135). The "National Plan for School Improvement (...)" aims to help every Australian child get a world-class education, no matter where they live, the school they attend, or their family background" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 136). It is disconcerting, therefore, that the youths identified in this study were denied this opportunity.

### *Conclusion*

The scope of this research did not include observations from Australian-born Bhutanese children of Bhutanese refugee parents. These findings apply only within a specific context, in which Bhutanese refugee youths recently settled in Cairns were denied enrolment based on their age. Although, as mentioned earlier, such denial was said to have affected eight families, the sample size of three families in this case study is small. While the narrow focus of the research allowed for in-depth understanding of the participants and their experiences, the findings cannot be generalised nor applied to the wider Bhutanese refugee community in Cairns. The results, therefore, apply only to the group of participants in the research.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from such a small case study, particularly when the issues are so complex and the contributing factors indisputably multidimensional. Nevertheless, the incidents in which Bhutanese young people were denied access to high school undeniably created some level of distress to both the young people and their families. Despite the negative impact of denied enrolment, one family chose to advocate for their rights to an education and eventually had the decision overturned. Not all families, however, have the confidence to pursue a similar path.

A longitudinal study, conducting follow up interviews with the families and children who were denied enrolment into high school would be useful, as well as further studies pursuing more in-depth exploration into the repercussions of these incidents and the longer term impacts on the individuals and families. An examination of the facilities and support available for the students enrolled at this high school, and the efficacy of the English classes attended by these refugee youths, could provide useful information on the most appropriate educational support for Bhutanese refugee youths.

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