

Teachers add value as agents of social inclusion and cohesion



Amber Flohm
Senior Vice President
December 02, 2020

Every day, schools, principals and teachers play a critical and invaluable role in their communities by contributing to society's social-inclusion outcomes.

The welcoming, settlement and development of new-arrival students and their families into public education has often been unrecognised but continues to be a fundamental ingredient of a teachers' contribution to NSW and Australia.

The number of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students has grown from 87,717 in 2004 to what will be 201,000 in 2021, proudly reflecting our history as an immigration nation. During that same period, the number of schools catering for students with EAL/D needs has increased from 747 to 1591 or, put another way, there will be only 600 public schools by 2021 that will not have EAL/D students as part of their cohort.



The student population requiring EAL/D support grows each year, on average, by 10,000 and represents 25 per cent or one in four public school students across the system. These figures do not include our students learning in intensive English centres (IECs) and the Intensive English High School, which enrol about 1800 students each year, assisting almost 11,000 students from refugee backgrounds in public education in NSW.

Ninety-one per cent of all refugee students in NSW are enrolled in public schools, cementing the reality that public education — and more specifically its teachers and schools — does the heavy lifting for multicultural education. Naturally, this percentage is replicated across the number of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and identify as from a language background other than English (LBOTE).

An increase of 46 per cent of LBOTE students between 2004 to 2019 strengthens our diversity, as CALD students now represent one in every three in our public schools across NSW. Such cultural and linguistic diversity in our student populations has certainly enriched our public school communities, and society more broadly.

The growth in EAL/D students in our schools over this period reflects newly arrived migrant and refugee populations, including international students, and is responsive to national immigration policy and decisions.

A focus on regional settlement as part of Australia's immigration program over the past decade has translated to more EAL/D students in regional public schools, which have not always had the experience and expertise available to meet large numbers of student enrolments, often in quick succession. Wollongong, Newcastle, Wagga Wagga, Coffs Harbour, Albury and Armidale have formed the largest settlement hubs and the transformation in their public schools has been extraordinary.

Each newly arrived refugee population comes with its own unique experiences, different journeys and levels of education (and disruption to the same), distinct cultural understandings and norms, languages and religions. Some come with experiences of torture and trauma, some having spent time in immigration detention or living in community detention.

Their experiences and diversity necessitate the development of specific pedagogies, curriculum and programs that can be distinct in each of these contexts and, indeed, each of the classrooms and parent communities where these students learn. The wellbeing and complexity of these students' needs, both educational and social, has been an increasing focus of their teachers for some time. They take on additional roles in support of their students that are definitely beyond any formal requirements of their work.

Naturally, the EAL/D and LBOTE parent communities are as diverse as the students themselves and their roles in schools, and expectations on teachers and schools, are just as varied. Many LBOTE parents come from cultures that traditionally like to leave formal education to the school and only get involved on a need-to basis. Other parents, who may not have acquired English to a level that gives them confidence yet, will often communicate through an interpreter, organised by the school. Other families come to the school each day with their aspirations and anxieties and wait at the teacher's classroom door for feedback on their child's progress. Culturally and linguistically diverse parent communities are, of course, a mirror to our broader society and their degree and manner of involvement in their children's school is most often formed by their own educational experience, if they have one, and their cultural practices and beliefs.

What has become increasingly obvious over the past 15 years is that schools are working much harder to engage their parent communities and devise a broad range of creative strategies and initiatives that in the past would have been unheard of. These include events way beyond the traditional subject selection nights, and parent and community forums, and include parent cooking classes and clubs, computer workshops, financial and digital literacy courses, homework hubs, men's sheds, forums to provide assistance in sourcing government, medical and other social services, and celebrations of cultural and religious significance to their student populations.

Many of our EAL/D students and families come from some of the most disadvantaged communities across NSW and that intersectional disadvantage creates a complicated context for schools and teachers to operate within. They are suffering under the weight of pressures associated with increased poverty, isolation, family unemployment and breakdown, increased domestic violence, and social and educational disadvantage.

For many of our public schools deeply involved in multicultural education, the local school has become much more of a central community service than it once was. This is of enormous reciprocal benefit for the parent communities and their relationship with their children's school, principal and teachers, particularly those who have recently arrived in Australia and continue to navigate the settlement phase.

Public schools and their teachers have been required, with increased intensity, to meet the educational, social and emotional needs of all these students in contexts, often unfamiliar, and address the many and varied complex family situations that accompany and underpin the startling growth in statistics.

Despite the high stakes, there has been a lack of commitment by government to multicultural education — further evidenced by a lack of a "Premier's Priority" in this area and structures in the Department — and schools, principals and teachers have often been left without the support and enabling conditions to further advance the needs of these students.

The fact that so many schools have worked intensively to address this critical area of public education is testament to the extraordinary dedication and commitment of our teachers to their students and communities.

Principals and teachers have again risen to the challenge where the system has been unwilling and unable. They are well aware of the gravity of this responsibility. The support and prioritisation of the teaching, learning and wellbeing of their EAL/D and CALD student populations and their families will ensure their

students have the greatest opportunity to reach their full potential for further study, employment and contribution as valued members of our broader society, and to social cohesion no less!