

Tips for teaching students with a refugee background

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So many refugee children have missed out on the opportunity to play and be kids, so allowing time for developmental play or structured play helps to teach social skills, problem solving, responsive talk, conflict resolution and role play for debriefs, said Federation member Vi Nguyen (pictured), who teaches at Fairfield Public School, where about 40 per cent of the student population come from a refugee background.

“It also allows for lesson breaks where kids have fun and can destress. It makes a huge difference in ability to talk through issues and for kids to develop the skills that play brings to younger years.

“The best professional development in recent years that has assisted teaching refugees is Play Therapy and Reflective Responding.”

Back in 1995, Vi sat in a year 1 classroom in south-western Sydney, having recently arrived from a refugee camp in Malaysia, where he'd spent his whole life. His family had sought refuge in Malaysia when they struggled and feared for their future after the Vietnam War ended.



As a teacher, Vi has found the research and pedagogy around the “STARS” (Safety, Trust, Attachment, Responsibility, Success) framework model of teaching refugees invaluable. The framework provides teachers with the understanding of how refugee students, particularly those with trauma, move through a process of learning, if they are afforded high expectations, high challenge, and the necessary support to feel cared for, valued and connected to school and their teacher.

By establishing trust and safety, students will begin to attach or connect to learning as well as take risks and try new things, keep trying when tasks are hard, etc. If they see they are valued for their experience and valued for what they already know, then supported in language acquisition to express their knowledge, learning picks up and steams ahead.

He recommends having professional learning in the STARS framework, if you are teaching refugees and asylum seekers, as well as engaging in other professional development programs such as Teaching English Language Learners, Teaching Refugees In My Classroom, Grammar and Writing and Vocabulary Development action research/university projects.

“Teachers will improve learning outcomes and classroom management by including structured routines, word walls and visible routines, as well as ‘think aloud’ modelling, where the teacher explains new content by demonstrating how to think and verbalising the words we normally say in our heads as you show students what to do/how to unpack the activity,” he said.

“These types of supports help students to feel safe and comfortable when needing to use English. Including a modelled component to learning, with opportunities for guided practice and independent work from there helps teachers guide students to achieve success and builds on their ability to operate with less support as time goes on.”

Vi said working with colleagues, having in-built time for professional learning and collaborative planning, lesson studies with colleagues who trust each other and quality, research-based professional development has really been of great assistance in developing his teaching skills over the years.

As a student, Vi attended Lansvale East Public School at the start of year 1 but then moved to Canley Vale Public School where he stayed until he went to Canley Vale High.

What stood out to Vi about primary school was year 4. This was the first time he was supported by ESL specialist teachers since arriving in Australia and it made a huge difference; he felt valued and learning became fun.

He remembers two specialist ESL (now known as English as an additional language or dialect, EAL/D) teachers, who taught English via song and drama, as well as sport. He had not received any interventions prior to year 4 and had been falling way behind. Repeating year 4 and having the ESL teachers, as well as some additional tuition sourced by his family meant that Vi found learning clicked and he powered ahead in learning after that. He did not require any support in high school.

Vi recalls being shocked in high school when he saw new arrivals and refugee peers struggling in high school without the benefit of ESL specialists or Intensive English Centres. As a student, he knew the value of this support and felt compelled to assist where he could with peers who had none.