



**ISSUES PAPER**

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## **A Three-Way Partnership?**

Exploring the experiences of CLD families in schools

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**A Three-Way Partnership? Exploring the experiences of CLD families in schools**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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Victoria has a remarkably diverse population. There are over 180 languages and dialects spoken across the State, from established languages like Greek and Italian to newer languages such as Somali and Dari. The 2001 Census indicated that one in five Victorians speak a language other than English at home (VOMA, 2003). This issues paper, which accompanies the *Opening the School Gate: Engaging CLD Families in Schools* resource kit for teachers (CMYI, 2006), explores themes and issues around culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families' expectations and involvement in schools.

Despite the success of some students from CLD backgrounds in Victorian schools (Nguyen & Ho, 1995, p 234), many more under perform, particularly those who face severe disadvantage due to low literacy and previously disrupted schooling. Refugees are at particularly high risk in our education system, as are any students who have come from an education system that is vastly different from that in Australia. Engaging the parents of these students is critical to the improvement of educational outcomes for migrant and refugee young people.

Studies have shown that the active involvement of parents in their child's education has a significant positive effect on students. Research indicates that parental engagement can lead to higher academic success, improved attendance, more time spent on homework, increased school retention and fewer discipline problems. (Victorian Parenting Centre, 2005)

Aside from the important educational outcomes for CLD young people, schools can play a vital role in the settlement process for those born overseas, supporting students and their families to feel that they belong and have a meaningful contribution to make to Australian society.

Parental involvement in schooling can also bridge the gap in cultural values between home and school life that can occur in CLD families and ease any intergenerational conflict that may arise, improving the level of family connectedness. Once families are connected with schools, they can receive assistance with their child's educational and social development. Feelings of connectedness to family, friends, community and school have been shown to be the most significant factors underpinning an individual's resilience (Commonwealth of Australia, 2001).

Despite the benefits of greater parental involvement in schools, many schools find it difficult to engage CLD families. Findings from the *Connecting CLD Parents* project<sup>1</sup> suggested that schools were struggling to engage CLD parents and were often confused and frustrated by the lack of parental involvement. Family members also seemed to experience confusion and frustration due to a lack of information and a feeling of disempowerment.

This paper explores some of the factors at play in the relationships that develop between CLD families and schools. *Opening the School Gate* (CMYI, 2006) accompanies this paper as a resource kit that outlines practical strategies to address barriers to greater parental engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Three-Way Partnership?* and *Opening the School Gate* (CMYI, 2006) are the result of the Connecting CLD Parents Project, a year long project which aimed to develop, deliver and evaluate information sessions for parents from CLD communities in the Northern region of Melbourne and share findings with other relevant schools and agencies. Funded by the Department of Family and Community Services, the project was a partnership initiative undertaken by a number of Reconnect services in Melbourne's North.

## 2. CLD FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

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There are many factors that influence how families interact and engage with schools. For families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, and particularly those who are newly arrived, understandings and expectations around school involvement can be varied. Migrant and refugee families often face barriers (such as language and issues relating to settlement) that Australian-born parents do not face that inhibit their more active involvement in schools. The following explores some of the context and issues relating to CLD families and schools.

### 2.1 The Family Context

The Western concept of the nuclear family is only one cultural variant on the family, and is also increasingly unrepresentative of many Australian families. There are numerous cultural constructions of the family among migrant and refugee communities. 'Family' may include extended family (including biological or non-biological members), and the roles and obligations adopted by different family members may be quite different from those that are understood within a nuclear family context.

Many non-related adults in young people's lives are referred to as aunts and uncles, reflecting their importance and need for respect. Many people in this role will offer support and discipline with the parent's permission, and may be quite influential in the upbringing of the young person. Older siblings (especially brothers) may take on a discipline role in families and have particular responsibility for ensuring their younger siblings are behaving appropriately and are protected. Many siblings, aunts and uncles take on a parenting or guardianship role in relation to young people. This is especially the case where parents have died or are still living overseas. Some are only a little older than the young person and have taken on the role without much preparation and are often under-supported and unrecognised.

While it is important to be sensitive to cultural difference and some of the issues families from CLD backgrounds may face, it is also important not to presume any culture is homogenous, and rather to accommodate the diversity of needs and perspectives of each family. Each family is unique and within any community there will be a variety of opinion and difference. For example, what one Turkish family may represent as the way 'Turkish families' live will be dependant on their life experience, their own family traditions, personal preference, and differences in age, religion, migration history and political belief. While there may be some similarities between families within a cultural group, it is important to recognise uniqueness and difference in order to avoid stereotyping.

## 2.2 The Impact of Migration

Newly arrived families face complicated new systems and are often negotiating complex, disrupted family relationships. Many families are fragmented as a result of war and migration, with family members missing, separated, or unable to migrate due to death or remarriage. Some families are living together for the first time following reunification (e.g. father missing for ten years, now living in Australia). Family members may be at different stages in terms of settlement, and may be coping with this change in a variety of ways.

Many parents who have migrated to Australia find their role in the family changes significantly after settlement. Young people may be more confident with English due to time spent in school and with English-speaking peers and teachers, which means they may take on a new role in advocating for the family. Children are often called on to provide assistance with interpreting. This can lead to a power/role shift within the family, with children taking on a great deal of responsibility which can be both embarrassing and emotionally burdening for the child, and may also lead to parents feeling dependent and powerless. This power imbalance has significant long-term consequences for family dynamics and can lead to family conflict.

The loss of status that many families experience on migration is also very difficult. Some may come with expectations that Australia is a 'land of plenty' (after all, this is the international image we continue to project), and that work and home life will be better post-migration. They often experience a shock when their settlement experience is a tumultuous one, and employment, housing, and family issues can be overwhelming. Newly arrived families often lack the support they have come to enjoy from family and friends overseas, despite the very harsh physical and economic conditions they may have had to endure.

Some families experience a complete class shift on arrival in Australia. Professionals who come with overseas qualifications may face unemployment due to a lack of Australian work experience and discrimination. They may feel frustrated that the skills, qualifications and experience they have acquired overseas are not recognised within the Australian system. Families also feel a loss of social power in having to adjust to a whole new language, culture and system. Depression can be a significant factor for many newly arrived families, for both men and women, although gendered expectations that fathers should provide economic security for the family may have a particular impact on those who are unable to gain work, or who have to work in unrelated or low-skilled areas.

Many large or extended families find it difficult to secure appropriately sized and affordable housing and may be forced to live in cramped or overcrowded conditions. Those in public

housing or on low incomes in private rental find it particularly difficult, with a shortage of 4-6 bedroom properties available in Australia.

The financial pressure faced by newly arrived families can be extreme; unemployment is often high, and families may be paying off pre-migration debts from overseas or sending money to help other relatives left behind. Refugees have usually arrived in Australia with no possessions or financial assets and have to start their lives again. Those who have settled in Australia for longer have the opportunity to build economic stability and financial resources over time, but this also depends on employment opportunities, the cost of accommodation and other factors.

Migrant and refugee families are over-represented in low paying low-skilled occupations in Australia. From a school perspective, financial issues affect things such as a families' capacity to purchase uniforms, books and contribute to school levies and camps. While some financial assistance is available (like the Education Maintenance Allowance from Centrelink), and some schools have put some positive programs in place to reduce financial disadvantage, the increasing costs associated with education are a heavy burden on many migrant and refugee families.

### **2.3 Families' Fears**

Parents often have a strong desire to see their children succeed in terms of both the dominant culture (such as obtaining a tertiary degree) while maintaining the mores and values of their culture of origin. Parents sometimes express concern about the 'westernisation' of their children. Given that there is often little recognition within broader Australian culture of the significance of cultural maintenance to the wellbeing and happiness of family members, parents fear losing their children as well as losing their history and traditions. Aspects of the home culture can therefore be exaggerated (and become more rigid) in the parents' bid to preserve formerly taken-for-granted cultural practices (Coventry et al, 2002).

The concept of adolescence as a time of transition from childhood to adulthood is not always understood in the same way across cultures. The expectations placed on children and adults within families can be markedly different. Some family members notice the emphasis placed on encouraging independence and the formation of individual identity through the teenage years in Australia. This can conflict with cultural norms that see the process of transition to adulthood as a fulfilment of roles and responsibilities and the development of a greater sense of inter-dependence within the family.

Many migrant families feel less safe in the Australian community than they felt overseas, where there was an expectation that the community would intervene and protect their

children. For example, in some countries children are often seen outdoors late at night and parents have few fears for their child's wellbeing. There is often a higher level of anxiety around safety for those who have been refugees. For refugee families whose children have been lost, injured or endangered, the anxiety can be extremely high. These fears around safety can affect parents' willingness for their children to be involved in extracurricular activities such as camps.

Many families also have a fear that other people in the community will find out about private family problems if they seek help about family issues. This fear may lead to families feeling reluctant to approach services and schools. It also means some families, especially those from smaller or emerging communities, may be reluctant to use interpreters or may want to use family members as interpreters for fear of lack of confidentiality and community shaming.

## 2.4 Parents' Experiences of Schooling

Parents' and caregivers' perceptions of schooling and parental involvement are heavily influenced by their own experiences of schooling in other countries. Some may have received little or no formal education while others will be tertiary educated. Those who have come as refugees may have missed out on secondary schooling altogether. In some countries the majority of people receive primary schooling but a smaller number go on to complete secondary education, depending on the resources of the family and the community. Others will be highly qualified in an area of expertise, and thus have high expectations of similar outcomes for their children.

Education systems internationally vary greatly, yet there are some general trends and similarities that migrant families from non-English speaking countries have described in their schooling. Those who are educated in European countries may find more similarities with the Australian system. The following table highlights some of the variations in schooling systems.

### Variations in Australian and overseas schooling systems

Issue	Australian Schooling System	Overseas Variants
Gender	The majority of schools are co-educational. Girls encouraged to achieve academically in a range of fields.	Boys and girls are educated separately in many countries. In some countries girls receive little education.
Allocation of year level	Classes generally arranged within year levels according to student's age.	Students may be in class with students from a range of ages and/or abilities.
Timetabling	Timetables organised on regular cycles. The standard school day is 9am-3pm.	Sometimes standard daily timetable or no formalised timetables. School days may be afternoons only, or varied for each year level.

Discipline	Focus on individual responsibility and self-management within set rules /policies. Detention, suspension and expulsion in place of physical punishment.	More external boundaries set around discipline, and in some countries a stricter morality. Some use of physical punishment in discipline.
Learning style	The process of learning and mastery of a range of skills is emphasised. Uniqueness, creativity and individual expression are valued.	Received learning style, transmission of facts and rote learning methods common. Perfection of an accepted standard, or development of general skill may be valued.
Homework	May involve completion of class work, practice examples, research, and collaborative projects.	Sometimes homework not required. Where required, more focus on set tasks and completion of classroom work rather than developmental projects.
Assessment	Students assessed for comprehension of material and application of understanding through written work, practical demonstration, and group presentation.	There may be an expectation of word-for -word reproduction of data (memorisation of text). Oral testing or written work may be emphasised.
Interaction with teachers	Students are encouraged to have a high level of interaction with teachers. Teachers tend to be seen as facilitators.	Teachers often seen as experts, and relationships formal. In some countries asking the teacher questions is seen as disrespectful.
Teaching ratios and class sizes	Mostly between 20 and 30 students per teacher in government secondary schools.	May be large class sizes - up to 60 students in one room.
Skill development	Students are encouraged to develop on a social, emotional, physical and intellectual level appropriate to age. Extracurricular activities and excursions encouraged.	Often more focus on academic achievement and formalised learning environments. There may be some sports activities and excursions, but no school camps.
Responsibility of parents	A three-way relationship between home and school is seen as ideal. Parents asked to play an active role, attending the school for parent teacher interviews, meetings and extracurricular activities.	Often a more strict separation between home and school life and parents are not expected to have much of a role with the school unless a problem arises.

### **Baking a Cake**

A Somali youth worker compared the education systems in Australia and Somalia by using an analogy of a chef teaching people how to make a cake.

'The Australian schooling system is like this: The chef provides all the ingredients and talks about how they interact with one another. He gives some basic cooking principals, and gets students to complete some tasks, like beating the butter and sugar, but then asks the students to choose their own recipe and apply the principles learnt.

In Somalia the chef would provide the ingredients, teach the one recipe step by step, and ask students to make an exact replica of the original.'

## **2.5 Parents' Understanding of the Australian Education System**

There is quite a variation in knowledge about the Australian education system among migrant and refugee families. This depends on factors such as the length of time families have been in Australia, the supports they have been offered, the degree of connection established with the broader community, and their previous involvement with older children in the education system.

Many parents or caregivers have patchy information about the Australian schooling system gleaned from friends, their children, information from the school, or from other members of the community. This information may be third hand and is not always comprehensive or neutral. While parents may understand some areas of the education system, there may be significant gaps, even around core issues such as uniforms, assessment, books, and so on. Often what is missing is an understanding of the bigger picture – the system as a whole, and how individual school policies fit within this.

Generally parents from CLD backgrounds lack information about the Australian education system and need more support with practical issues relating to their children's schooling. Parents' access to information is particularly important at critical junctures, such as during the transition between English Language School/Centres and mainstream school, from primary to secondary school, as students start at a new school, or as they are making decisions about VCE or alternative pathways. There is often a lack of information available for parents from migrant and refugee communities about education pathways options, and many schools find that even when parents are aware of alternatives to VCE for example, they are not easily accepted for a range of reasons.

Families often report feeling powerless, unsure, and less able to help their children than they would like to. They are sometimes frustrated by not understanding the Australian system of education, have concerns about some of the underlying philosophies or practices within schools, or can feel the system is inadequate for their child's needs. More than anything, parents and carers talk about feeling disempowered and overwhelmed by a vastly different and complex system about which they have often been given little information in their own language.

## **2.6 Expectations of Young People and Schools**

Many parents have risked everything for the benefit of their children. Whether migrants or refugees, many families say the main reason for coming to Australia was to give their children a better life opportunity. Education is a very strong part of this. Consequently, many families place a strong emphasis on their children's education and/or future work and career. There can be enormous pressures on young people to achieve academically, despite the reality that many young people have a background of disrupted learning, have low literacy in English and in their first language, and numerous language and cultural barriers to educational achievement. Parents in this situation can often have unrealistically high expectations about their child's progress and success.

Among families there are a wide range of expectations with regards to the relationship between home and school. Some parents will have experienced a strict separation of school and home in their country of origin and thus have the perception that education is a teacher's responsibility, while family looks after home life. Many parents do not see the educational benefits of their involvement in the school and have not previously been given information about the concept of a three-way partnership between school, home and students. Some have a negative association between home and school, associating school contact with trouble. If their child is not in trouble, parents may not see the need for their involvement in the school. Contact with a school may also be seen as a woman's domain unless there are more serious disciplinary issues involved. That said, many family members are very willing to be more involved in schools if their needs are met and they know more about how they can contribute positively.

## **2.7 Career Expectations and Pathways**

For most overseas-born parents, education is a major key to a better life for themselves and their children, and many hold very high aspirations for their children in Australia. Education is often seen as the pathway out of the poverty experienced overseas and a means by which to help all the family to migrate and reunify. Tertiary education is desired equally for males and females in some communities, and more valued for males in others.

Schools regularly raise concerns that CLD parents seem less open to allowing their children to follow alternative pathways to VCE in secondary school. Many CLD parents have a preference for their children to pursue prestigious careers such as doctors, lawyers, or engineers. This preference could relate to a number of factors: Many overseas-qualified parents whose work and educational experience is not adequately recognised in Australia don't want the same for their children. These positions hold prestige internationally and so may lead to greater work opportunities across the world. These are careers that signify a high

degree of success within the Australian community in general, and are highly financially rewarding. It is also relevant that those who have lived in refugee camps for long periods have had most exposure to people in the medical, legal and engineering fields. Depending on their life experience, parents and young people may also have a limited knowledge of the wide variety of career options available in Australia.

Parents often do not know what pathways flow from alternatives to VCE such as TAFE, VET or VCAL (in Victoria), and whether their child will be able to attend university if they choose an alternative pathway to VCE. Parents may be wary of new courses that are yet to be tested by other students, or feel that TAFE is an unsuitable environment for their child in that there is less structure and discipline. They are often concerned when courses require more adult style responsibility for attendance and behaviour, have fewer contact hours than high school, or do not follow known subject outlines. Students are often required to travel longer distances to attend a TAFE course given that there are fewer TAFE institutions than secondary schools, which means parents may be worried about their child's safety travelling to and from TAFE. This may be particularly the case in relation to girls.

Some parents may feel that their children are being discouraged from attending university when school staff or workers suggest alternatives to VCE.

## **2.8 Language Barriers**

More recently arrived family members often feel very uncertain about communicating with schools and are concerned about their language skills (Migrant Information Centre, 2002, p.12). Schools do not always use interpreters when contacting families with limited English, and communication is limited. It is unsurprising then to find that many schools report that few migrant and refugee families are engaged strongly with the school.

Language issues often influence the depth of knowledge family members have about Australian schools. Parents with more confidence in English find it easier to receive information and feel connected with schools, unless their child attends a school where interpreting and translation services are used regularly or where there is bi-lingual support staff or community agency involvement.

## **2.9 The Stigma of School Contact**

Anecdotally from the *Connecting CLD Parents Project* research, it seems that parental contact with schools was largely crisis-focused, often around discipline issues when problems are at their worst. Families often associate contact with schools with some sort of trouble, such as their child being suspended. The fear and stigma associated with school contact

prevented a more positive relationship from forming, and this stigma needed to be proactively addressed to increase the likelihood that engagement strategies implemented by the school were taken up by CLD parents.

### **Case Study: Fartun**

Fartun is a 17-year-old Eritrean woman who is living with her older sister, Khadija, and her sisters' three adult children. Fartun's parents died in the war when she was very young and she has few memories of them. She spent many years in a refugee camp with her sister as her guardian before migrating to Australia with the aid of her sisters' oldest son who had migrated earlier. Also in her household are two young children from another sister, who is very sick in Kenya and is unable to migrate to reunify with her children. The family live in a four-bedroom house in Melbourne's outer western suburbs, and Fartun shares her bedroom with her younger niece. The family has very little income and are sending money regularly to their sister in Kenya who is in need of an operation.

The school Fartun attends is worried about how she will manage to complete VCE successfully. Fartun came to Australia after missing out on her first seven years of education and has found it extremely difficult to adjust to the Australian school system and to learn English and gain literacy skills. She is a seemingly very shy and quiet young woman who is very dedicated to her studies, often staying up until 2am to complete set homework.

Khadija has found the school system very confusing, and has not really had much contact with staff in her role as Fartun's guardian. She has a little conversational English but has never attended English classes, so relies on other family members for language support and feels embarrassed about this. Her son, Ahmed, has played a more active role as the male head of the family, and has attended meetings with the VCE Co-ordinator. The school is really unsure about what role various members of the family are playing, or who to call when they have concerns. The school has never called an interpreter before when talking to Khadija as someone with stronger English skills has often accompanied her, but this means Khadija has always been shut out of conversations and not really able to comprehend what is going on.

## 3. CLD YOUNG PEOPLE

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Like all adolescents, migrant and refugee young people experience multiple challenges in negotiating school, family, peers and social expectations. Without going into the many settlement and other issues faced by CLD young people<sup>2</sup>, the following explores the context and issues around young people, their families and school.

### 3.1 The Impact of Migration

For overseas born young people, identity formation and negotiating between home and school can be acutely difficult. The pressures of the migration experience can result in a heightened need for meaningful connections with school and family. For those young people who have migrated to Australia, growing up entails negotiating two simultaneous transition processes: the transition from one culture to another, and from childhood or adolescence to adulthood. Young people who have had a refugee background face particular difficulties in teenage years, and are forced to cope with the traumas of their recent past at a particularly vulnerable stage in their personal development (Coventry et al, 2002, p.2).

### 3.2 Expectations and Pressures on Young People

Many young people from CLD backgrounds are under considerable pressure to perform well at school. According to Ngaosyvathn (1993), some Lao students perceive their education as their vocation in life, and commonly students are excused from a range of family or household duties in order to complete homework. For other CLD young people, obligations to help at home, or prioritise family needs over that of the individual (such as attending a Centrelink appointment to assist a family member rather than attend school), can prove a significant barrier to educational success.

For those born overseas, it is rare that there is a full family constellation accompanying the young person to Australia. Young people without family or with only a few family members in Australia may feel the weight of expectation to obtain an education, establish themselves in a good job, supplement family income (often by sending money overseas) and sponsor remaining relatives to resettle in Australia. For example, Coventry *et al* (2002, p.53) note a Sudanese student as saying:

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive exploration of issues facing CLD young people, go to the 'issues' section of the CMYI website ([www.cmyi.net.au/issues](http://www.cmyi.net.au/issues))

*"It is my responsibility to get a good education so I can try to help my father in the future. At the moment, I can't help him."*

Sometimes, student and/or parent expectations of academic progress are unrealistic, leading to students struggling with a course that is too difficult for their academic ability and/or level of English. This is particularly the case where young people have a history of disrupted schooling.

Young people sometimes express dissatisfaction with the educational system because they believe it lacks the direction and discipline needed to help them meet family expectations. Attempts to live up to family or personal expectations of high educational achievement may be a source of frustration and contribute to poor concentration, under-achievement, school non-attendance or withdrawal and depression. At the same time, family encouragement is a key factor in motivating and enabling success.

### **3.3 Study Space**

Many young people find it extremely difficult to do homework or find a quiet study space in family homes where there is overcrowding. Children are sometimes forced to study on the kitchen table, often the centre of work and conversation in the house. Where girls in particular are expected to contribute to the cooking, cleaning and childcare in the family, the lack of space can severely impact a student's ability to complete set homework tasks. Some schools have reported that girls are doing homework very late into the night when the house is quieter, they can find space and they have completed other household chores. They find classroom concentration very difficult the next day as a result.

Overcrowding also has a significant impact on boys, given there is some degree of social obligation to welcome visiting friends and family to the family home. However, boys are sometimes more free from other expectations (such as cooking, cleaning or childcare) than girls.

### **3.4 Identity and Family Relationships**

Young people are often juggling the expectations of their families to retain significant ties to their cultural heritage, their desire to be accepted by peers, and their own need to find a balance between the two. The risk is that if they do not conform to cultural traditions, then they may become culturally alienated at a time in life when family and community supports are particularly valuable. Parents and caregivers can sometimes interpret English language acquisition as abandonment of traditional culture and values. This often leads to internalised conflict for a young person.

Intergenerational conflict can be very stressful and often deeply affects migrant and refugee families. Issues such as what style of clothing a young person chooses to wear, participation in swimming events at school, attending camps, or otherwise participating in 'normal school life', can prove difficult for young people to negotiate. Young people may want to make informed decisions about what they would like to do, however the risk of going against the wishes and expectations of their family and community must be taken into account before a decision is made.

### **3.5 Peer Support and Conflict**

In terms of peer support, more recently arrived young people may feel that their classmates do not understand their culture and miss the understanding and support of family and friends overseas.

There can be clashes between groups of young people in schools – based on friendship groups, kinship or cultural affiliations – in which hierarchies of power between individuals and groups are negotiated and tested. Anecdotally it seems young men who are finding academic progress more difficult (particularly those with low literacy) are more likely to become involved in this sort of conflict, and there appears to be a relationship between low self-esteem and social powerlessness for CLD young people, and more negative or aggressive behaviour in the school yard or classroom.

### **3.6 Language Issues**

Due to language issues and disrupted schooling, students from refugee backgrounds are often struggling to cope academically in mainstream schools after making the transition from an English Language Centre or School. Schools try to balance the academic level and age of a student when making decisions about which year level to place them in. In the absence of specialist language and literacy programs over and above the mainstream ESL classes, this can mean that students who have experienced disrupted education struggle to keep up and do not always understand their teacher. Students with language difficulties often find it very difficult to keep up with their Australian-educated peers and thrive within mainstream schools.

There are few alternative educational supports available for students with disrupted learning. Where programs such as after school homework support exist, they are often ad hoc community-based programs without sustainable funding, and which are unable to redress the underlying language and literacy needs of students with the limited resources available.

### **3.7 Decision Making**

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues' *Reconnect Young Refugees* program has found that in the absence of strong connections between parents and schools, students often make decisions about their own education (such as which school they attend, or which subjects to choose) without consultation with their families. Young people usually know much more than their families about school. It is not surprising therefore that parents report feeling they are losing control of their children, often despite their desire and best intentions to support their child's education. This intergenerational knowledge gap can itself be a cause of significant conflict at home.

## 4. SCHOOLS' ENGAGEMENT WITH CLD FAMILIES

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There are a wide diversity of schools and school communities, each with their own unique issues. The size, complexity, cultural composition, staff composition, history, resource capacity and style of management all impact on a school's ability to offer support to migrant and refugee families, as does the degree of emphasis placed on access and equity within the school. There is often a desire within schools to improve relationships with all parents, and CLD parents in particular. This desire can, however, be accompanied by a sense of hopelessness; that the task is too big and complicated. This is especially felt by schools that have made some previous attempts to engage parents but have been disappointed by the results. The following explores some of the common themes and issues for schools in engaging with CLD families.

### 4.1 Dealing with Complex Needs

At a structural level, teachers are often grappling with a number of changes to the curriculum and school support structures. Increased welfare expectations placed on schools signify major changes to the roles that teaching staff take on. Staff are increasingly being asked to take on roles that may be new or unfamiliar, leading to anxiety and burn out. Where secondary schools must address complex multiple needs, it can be hard to cater for the diversity of the school population with existing resources. That is, teachers and administrative staff need to engage with a diversity of student populations not only in terms of culture and language diversity, but also in terms of disability, sexuality, learning needs and other factors.

Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1998) suggest that increasingly Australian schools have been confronting a multitude of issues, such as teenage drug use, youth suicide, homelessness and early school leaving. Some schools have high needs populations around a range of complex issues and are forced to allocate limited staff and time resources to all the 'at risk' groups within the school population. This makes prioritising the issues of accessibility for CLD families difficult to focus on.

Staff who do have a keen interest in accessibility and equity do not always receive the support they need from the rest of the school to engage CLD parents and find the issue can be marginalised, or feel unsupported in making any new efforts.

### 4.2 Diverse School Populations

Some schools have a large and diverse spread of cultures within the student population and it can be difficult to know how to handle this diversity. While some schools have clearly

defined cultural groups, such as a large Greek, Turkish or Vietnamese communities, others have a number of small clusters of cultures represented. This makes meetings more complicated to organise, and in terms of economies of scale, potentially more work needs to be done to reach such a diverse population.

Schools are often facing big changes within the student community; strategies that worked before with some cultural groups may no longer be relevant. There may be a big influx of newly arrived families into the area, or families from new and emerging communities, who have different needs to other groups the school has worked with before.

Secondary colleges in areas of high refugee intake are often supporting students who are highly traumatised and are finding the student's trauma reactions affect their school life significantly. Increasingly refugee students are coming with no previous education or literacy in any language, requiring new teaching methods and approaches to learning. This can be difficult for schools to handle on their own without increased support and training. Schools are sometimes unaware of curriculum and other resources available to support them to implement effective models for refugee education.

Schools with significant numbers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds have access to Multicultural Education Aides who are able to provide more language and cultural support, and can sometimes play a significant role in bringing about a cultural awareness shift within a school and more supportive relationships with parents. Those with smaller ESL student populations, however, may not have the use of language aids.

### **4.3 The Process of Cultural Inclusion**

There can be a desire from school staff to ensure the school becomes more culturally inclusive, but sometimes they are not sure how to go about this process. Schools often do not have strong connections with ethnic communities and other organisations that may be able to assist to make links with CLD parents. Some schools seem confused at times about complex extended family formations, and staff can be unsure whom to approach to discuss concerns about a student.

While some training around cultural diversity is offered through the Language and Multicultural Education Resource Centre (LMERC) through the Department of Education & Training, staff need support and resourcing to develop a deeper understanding of parent's perspectives and cross cultural communication strategies.

## 5. CONCLUSION

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The need for a three-way partnership between schools, students and families has been articulated strongly through educational research and by schools across Australia. For families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, however, it is important that this concept is explored and schools do not take for granted that families have a shared understanding of a three-way partnership.

It is also important to consider the best ways to create meaningful partnerships with migrant and refugee families, which can perhaps best be undertaken by exploring their expectations, values, and life experiences while reflecting on those of staff and students in the school. Part of this work involves trialling different strategies to overcome barriers to understanding that can arise due to lack of information, and language, cultural, economic or other factors. The promotion of understanding and trust between migrant and refugee families and the schools their children attend is both essential and possible.

There are a number of resources that school staff can use to implement effective strategies to engage CLD families in their school. *Opening the School Gate: Engaging CLD families in schools* (CMYI, 2006) outlines a range of practical suggestions to improve school and family connections, and includes a resource section which outlines further publications, websites and services to contact for support around CLD youth and family engagement. (*Opening the School Gate* can be downloaded from [www.cmyi.net.au](http://www.cmyi.net.au).)

It is clear that the creation of a supportive school environment engendered through improving relationships between CLD families and schools will enable students from all backgrounds to flourish academically and socially.

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