








## Refugee Youth Program Network and Partnerships (School Hub)

Multicultural Community Centre Ltd, Fortitude Valley, Queensland

*This project also relates to:*

-  Families
-  Youth
-  Law
-  Community Harmony
-  Health

The *School Hub* project aims to provide education and information for refugee students and their parents to ease their settlement experience and so that they build self-esteem and confidence.

The Multicultural Community Centre coordinates services for refugee students and their parents by linking schools and various government and non-government organisations together to create a *School Hub*. The program is run in the Moorooka and Yeronga areas in Brisbane's south, where large numbers of newly arrived refugee families live.

Refugee children and young people often come from extremely difficult situations where schooling has been highly disrupted or where no formal schooling was available. Refugee youth often have a very limited knowledge of English and may have suffered torture and trauma experiences. Overall, these students have high educational needs and require special consideration.

The project provides:

- information sessions about healthy food
- increased cross-cultural awareness among children of non-refugee backgrounds to reduce discrimination and prejudice
- information about the role of the Queensland police who educate the children about their rights and responsibilities
- assistance with homework for refugee children
- an introduction to basic computer concepts.

A Multicultural Community Centre project officer, funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's *Settlement Grants Program*, ran the project in 2006–07. Yeronga State School (Primary), Moorooka State School and Mt Crosby State School were partners in the project. Queensland Health funded the information sessions about healthy food.

### Community consultations

Initial consultations were held with leaders from the Rwandan, Liberian, Sudanese and Burundian communities. Members of the communities were then consulted.

Health promotion among students emerged as a key issue for many communities.

The need for cultural exchange visits between schools was also highlighted in order to address negative cultural stereotyping of refugee students.

### Healthy Food program

Refugee students and their parents have usually spent considerable time living in poverty and lack awareness about nutrition. Many families feel overwhelmed by the range of food available in Australia and are unsure about how to prepare and cook different produce. Some newly arrived refugees also find it difficult to read food packaging labels because they have poor English.

The Healthy Food program provides nutrition education to primary school students from a refugee background. A Queensland Health community nutritionist who checks the contents of students' lunchboxes, explains the nutritional value of each food. The students record the information on scorecards.

The nutritionist then accompanies the students on a tour of a local supermarket where they fill in a workbook as they peruse the shelves. Various ingredients are bought to make a healthy lunch for the students. On their return to the Multicultural Community Centre, students are taught how to make the lunch and they record the food that they have bought on the scorecards. They then enjoy eating the food they have prepared with their classmates.

## School cultural exchange

Moorooka State School in Brisbane's southern suburbs has a high percentage of students of refugee backgrounds as well as other culturally and linguistically diverse students. Students from the school visited students from Mt Crosby State School in Brisbane's western suburbs, which is predominantly attended by Australian-born students without culturally diverse backgrounds. The Moorooka students were encouraged to share their experiences as refugees and explain their journey to Australia.

The school exchange component of this project has received funding for the 2008 calendar year as a *Living in Harmony* community project from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

## Information sessions with police

Cross-cultural liaison officers from Queensland Police addressed students from Moorooka and Yeronga State Schools providing information about the rights and responsibilities of the students.

## Homework club and computer classes

Volunteers helped five children from a Sudanese family with homework at their home on two occasions.

As well as assistance with homework, the volunteers explained Australian values and culture, and helped parents to read and understand correspondence from government agencies such as Centrelink.

Information technology graduates ran computer classes after school at the Multicultural Community Centre. Transport was provided. The teachers were impressed with what the children learnt from the computer classes, such as creating graphs from spreadsheets, preparing PowerPoint presentations and writing Happy Father's Day letters.

## Achievements

Teachers from Moorooka and Yeronga State Schools were enthusiastic about the Healthy Food program, noticing an increase in sharing and communication between students and greater awareness about food hygiene.

The cultural exchange visit to Mt Crosby State School was equally positive. The refugee children made friends with students from the school. As a result, there was an increase in the refugee

children's self-esteem and in social cohesion and community harmony. Multicultural Community Centre's (former) project officer, Michael Chung, said:

I was amazed with what the students got out of this excursion. Initially, there was reticence and shyness but this was quickly overcome by sharing information about each other's backgrounds, compiling this into a scrapbook with photos, playing sport together, and with each group performing songs. By the end of the school day, neither group wanted the Moorooka students to leave. Friendships were made and will hopefully be sustained as participants swapped email addresses with promises to keep in touch.

For the parents of the refugee students who come from cultures where parents are not invited to be involved in the school unless there is a discipline problem, gaining a more positive and realistic impression of their child's school and their own role in their child's education was a positive outcome.

## Challenges

The main hurdles project staff faced in implementing the project were inadequate human resources. This meant that only a portion of the planned activities could be implemented.

There were problems recruiting volunteers for the Homework Club and the Multicultural Community Centre is still striving to organise volunteers to enable delivery of the program to more students on a more regular basis.

## Key factors in the project's success

Parental involvement at all stages of the *School Hub* project was crucial for its success. Ideally parents and their children should attend sessions together so that they all understand the project's principles.

## Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Ensure all project partners are working as part of a team and communicate at the same level.

The school needs to be organised, follow procedures for safety and keep the project simple.

It is best to engage professional interpreters wherever possible when consulting the community and not to rely on students to interpret.



## Profile > Kapala

**Kapala** is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She, her husband and two daughters were forced to leave their country of origin due to war. The family found shelter in Zambia where they spent the next seven years.

In 2004 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees granted the family refugee status and soon after the Australian Government accepted them and resettled them in Brisbane. Kapala's third child, a son, was born in Australia. Kapala likes Australia, because there is peace here. Her biggest hurdle has been learning English.

The Multicultural Community Centre's *School Hub* project in Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, has been a very positive experience for both Kapala and her daughter Cynthia, who attends Moorooka Primary School.

Through the project, Cynthia has learnt about healthy food and now consumes less junk food and fewer soft drinks.

Cynthia's cultural exchange visit to Mt Crosby State School was also a positive experience. Initially nervous when she arrived, Cynthia quickly relaxed and started to open up to the Mt Crosby State School children. She is now in email contact with several of the students.

photo > Lydia, Kapala and Cynthia from the Democratic Republic of Congo

Refugee students need to be thoroughly briefed by their teachers before they begin the cultural exchange at other schools. They need to be shown respect by everyone involved. Teachers should also have activities planned and performances rehearsed.

The *School Hub* project incorporated a number of mini projects. It was important to tackle the smaller projects one by one and to implement an evaluation process for each of them.

### Contact details

Multicultural Community Centre Ltd  
977 Ann Street  
Fortitude Valley Queensland 4006

Phone: 07 3257 1868

Fax: 07 3257 1869

Email: [info@mcccommunitycentre.org](mailto:info@mcccommunitycentre.org)

Website: [www.mcccommunitycentre.org](http://www.mcccommunitycentre.org)