



# The Education, Wellbeing and Identity of Children with Migrant or Refugee Backgrounds

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and Prof Martha Augoustinos**

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# Executive Summary

## Background

When arriving in a resettlement country, young people with migrant or refugee backgrounds may face a range of challenges, including negotiating changing identities, challenges learning about and ‘fitting in’ to a new culture, and issues such as discrimination or social exclusion (Kromidas 2011; Isik-Ercan, 2014; Woods, 2009; Riggs & Due, 2011). In addition, they may have previously experienced issues that have the potential to affect their ongoing psychological and physical wellbeing, such as experiences of torture, trauma, dislocation and disrupted education (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Scheeringa, Zeanah, & Cohen, 2011; Christie & Sidhu, 2002). Taken together, these factors lead to a complex interplay of issues that affect young people’s sense of wellbeing and identity in their new country (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010; Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009). These complexities are particularly salient within educational contexts, where young people with migrant or refugee backgrounds frequently encounter the sociocultural and physical environments of their resettlement countries for the first time. Nevertheless, schools can provide an important avenue for support for young people with refugee or migrant backgrounds, with previous research indicating that positive educational experiences can boost self-esteem and resilience, encourage community participation and the development of peer-relationships, and enable young people to build on their existing skills, knowledge and abilities (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014, Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett 2010, Keddle, 2012; de Heer, Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2015).

## Research Aims

This research sought to examine the educational experiences of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds within the South Australian Intensive English Language Program (IELP). In order to achieve this overarching aim, the study followed a group of students (N = 63 at the start of the study) through their time in the IELP and transition into mainstream classes across a three-year period. In addition, the study examined the perceptions of teachers and other educators working in primary schools with an Intensive English Language Centre (IELC) on site.

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## Report Overview

The first chapter of this report provides some background and context to the current study. Chapter two provides an overview of the research itself, including details concerning methodology. Next, chapters three to six consider students' experiences in the IELP and beyond. Specifically, chapter three considers school engagement in the IELP, chapter four examines the experiences of transition from the IELP into mainstream education in Australia, with chapter five extending this analysis to considering terms two, three and four in mainstream education. Chapter six then shifts the focus to examine wellbeing variables, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy. Chapter seven provides an overview of teachers' experiences of working in the IELP. Finally, chapter eight concludes the report with a summary of the major findings.

## Findings

There is a body of evidence which indicates that students in resettlement countries with migrant or refugee backgrounds typically show high levels of school engagement, and this is echoed in the findings of this study as presented in chapter three. Specifically, chapter three indicates that students reported high levels of wellbeing during their time in the IELP, and that school was a positive experience for this cohort of children. Furthermore, the research found that participants were particularly interested in forming and maintaining friendships in their new schools, however some indicated that they found this challenging.

While time in the IELP was seen by the children in the study as positive and enjoyable, transition into mainstream classes was reported as an anxiety-provoking time, as reported in chapter four. This was particularly the case for students who were exiting the program and transitioning to a different school rather than entering a mainstream class at the same school, although there was a drop in liking school for all students. Students transitioning straight into High School were particularly anxious about exiting the IELP. Despite this, students indicated that the transition typically went well when visited by the researcher in their first term post-transition, and as such, this level of anxiety may not be out of proportion to that experienced by all children when facing school transitions. However, the qualitative results suggest that liking and being happy at school may drop in particular due to concerns over English language competency and difficulty forming friendships – indicating that this cohort of students experience some challenges above and beyond those experienced by other students transitioning in mainstream settings.

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Chapter five examines progression through the mainstream education system in terms of school engagement. The main findings reported in this chapter are as follows:

- Levels of liking school are high, and remain high, with a slight drop in the first term post-transition.
- Levels of happiness at school drop significantly in the first term post-transition but increase again in the second term (although do not return to the levels previously reported while students were in the IELP).
- Students transitioning to a different school and students with refugee backgrounds reported the lowest levels of happiness at school in both term one and term two in mainstream classes.
- Liking learning remains roughly constant across transition and into mainstream education.
- Levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher decreased for refugees in term one after transition, and continued to decrease in term two.
- Levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher were significantly lower for students who transitioned to a different school than for those who remained at the same school, at both term one and term two after transition.
- Friendships remained a dominant concern for students during the first year after transitioning from the IELP.

Chapter six turns the focus of the report to students' self-esteem, self-efficacy and overall wellbeing. Specifically, this chapter found that self-esteem levels were very high overall, although refugee students reported slightly lower levels of self-esteem than migrant students. All students' self-esteem dropped in the first term post-transition, but increased again in the second. Self-efficacy in relation to learning English was lower than other subjects (specifically art and sport), and dropped significantly in the first term after transition. Interestingly, this drop also occurred in relation to art and sport (with the exception of refugee students, who reported higher levels of self-efficacy in relation to learning art after transition). In addition, several themes emerged from the qualitative data relating to wellbeing at school. These were:

- Sharing religion, language and culture is important to students' sense of self and wellbeing within the school environment
- Children miss their families, relatives, friends and pets in their countries of origin
- Subjects which allow students to demonstrate their skills other than English are important to students
- Refugee students face additional challenges that impact their schooling.

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Next, chapter seven provides an overview of teachers' experiences and perceptions of the IELP. This chapter identifies the strengths and weaknesses of this model of English education provision, as reported by the teachers. The main strengths included students being able to feel a part of the school community, being included through whole school approaches that recognise cultural diversity, the smaller class sizes of the program, and perhaps most importantly – that the IELP offers students with migrant and refugee backgrounds a 'safe space' in which to enter mainstream education in Australia. Challenges of the program were identified as administration issues (such as the rolling intake of students into the IELP throughout the year), transition into mainstream classes, and multiple diversities within classes (such as students with learning difficulties). Overall, teachers and educators included in the study identified that the IELP was a positive beginning to school for students with migrant and refugee backgrounds.

## Recommendations

Overall, this research indicates that the IELP offers students support in their early experiences of education, and it would be beneficial to students if these levels of support were continued even when they are required to transition to new schools after their time in intensive English classes. Below, we outline some recommendations stemming from our research. In making these recommendations, we recognise that many schools are already undertaking some of these suggestions, and that in other cases broader issues such as funding can make implementation difficult. Nevertheless, our research indicates that these recommendations would improve the overall educational experiences and wellbeing of young students with migrant and refugee backgrounds.

### **Recommendation 1: Time in the IELP**

*The time an individual student spends in the IELP should continue to be based on individual student readiness for exiting the program and transitioning to mainstream education, particularly in the case of students with refugee backgrounds.* We note that this is currently in place through the Extended Eligibility Policy, which allows students to stay in the program for an extended period of time, as appropriate. Furthermore, students with refugee backgrounds are currently eligible for 18 months in the IELP. The findings of this study are strongly supportive of individually-based needs assessments and as such, responsive and flexible policies which support students with high needs or with refugee backgrounds should continue.



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## **Recommendation 2: Transition into mainstream education**

*Students who transition to different schools (rather than remaining at the same site) after exiting the IELP require additional support.* Currently, extra resources are provided for students transitioning into mainstream education twice per year, and recommendations for the use of this funding are also provided by IELP staff, and outlined in DECD transition documentation. In order to increase positive student outcomes, mainstream schools should consult with the English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) program concerning best use of this funding at their school level, including the following suggestions:

- Increasing the mainstream school's current EALD staffing allocation.
- Providing increased bilingual support for students entering the school from the IELP.
- Supporting EALD professional development programs for all teachers.
- Strengthening the enrolment and transition process itself.

The findings of this report also support the advice contained in the best-practice transition documentation provided by the IELP, and indicate that mainstream schools should access the transition resources that are currently available. In particular, best-practice around transition should include:

- Developing school policy/practices (at the mainstream school level) concerning transition of students from the IELP and into the mainstream setting.
- Supporting two to three day orientations for students at the start of the school term in order to make sure that students know where to seek help, have assistance in meeting peers and know how to navigate their new school environment.
- Visits to students in the IELP by teachers in mainstream schools in order to make connections and begin building a relationship with students prior to transition.

The findings presented in this research indicate that such actions taken by mainstream schools would lead to positive outcomes for students with migrant or refugee backgrounds exiting the IELP. These recommendations (and others) can currently be found in the IELP transition policy material. It is worth noting that these recommendations are particularly pertinent for students who exit the IELP and go straight to high school, and that the current IELP documentation does provide further recommendations to support the transition of these students.

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### **Recommendation 3: Teacher training and support for working with students with migrant or refugee backgrounds**

Mainstream schools and teachers should take up the training opportunities on offer from the EALD team in order to ensure that students continue to be supported as they begin mainstream education. In addition, increased cross-cultural training structures should be put in place for all teaching staff, rather than only specialist English language support staff or IELP staff. In line with this recommendation, increased cross-cultural training and education concerning the diverse needs of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds should be provided through University teaching programs (e.g., Bachelor or Master of Education courses).

### **Recommendation 4: Whole school approaches**

*Whole school approaches which value the knowledge and experiences of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds should be the overarching framework for all schools.* In particular, schools should recognise the skills that students from culturally diverse backgrounds bring with them, and ensure that these are foregrounded in curriculum, together with core areas such as English, maths and science. In particular, this research found that subjects which don't rely solely on English (e.g., sport, art, or music) allow students to demonstrate their strengths and play a role in increasing levels of self-esteem and wellbeing.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

When arriving in a resettlement country, young people with migrant or refugee backgrounds may face a range of challenges, including negotiating changing identities, challenges learning about and ‘fitting in’ to a new culture, and issues such as discrimination or social exclusion (Kromidas 2011; Isik-Ercan, 2014; Woods, 2009; Riggs & Due, 2011). In addition, they may have previously experienced issues that have the potential to affect their ongoing psychological and physical wellbeing, such as experiences of torture, trauma, dislocation and disrupted education (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Scheeringa, Zeanah & Cohen, 2011; Christie & Sidhu, 2002). Taken together, these factors lead to a complex interplay of issues that affect young people’s sense of wellbeing and identity in their new country (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010; Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009). These complexities are particularly salient within educational contexts, where young people with migrant or refugee backgrounds frequently encounter the sociocultural and physical environments of their resettlement countries for the first time. Nevertheless, schools can provide an important avenue for support for young people with refugee or migrant backgrounds, with previous research indicating that positive educational experiences can boost self-esteem and resilience, encourage community participation and the development of peer-relationships, and enable young people to build on their existing skills, knowledge and abilities (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014, Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett 2010, Keddle, 2012, de Heer, Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2015).

Moreover, the educational experiences of young people with migrant or refugee backgrounds are important due to the critical role that education has to play in a range of developmental outcomes for young people, including not only intellectual and cognitive development (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013; Cox, 2012), but also in relation to a range of areas related to childhood development and wellbeing more broadly, such as social development, employment opportunities, and community involvement. Education also plays a role in acculturation in the case of migrant and refugee children specifically (Berry, 1997; Matthews, 2008; Hatoss, O’Neill, & Eacersall, 2012; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). Furthermore, early experiences of education can play a crucial role in developing school engagement, which is particularly important in relation to ongoing educational achievement

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and ensuring that a gradual process of disengagement leading to attrition does not occur (Marks, 2000; Fredericks et al., 2004).

Despite the clear importance of early experiences of education for childhood development, identity and wellbeing, there is very little research that has considered the experiences of *primary-school aged* students with migrant or refugee backgrounds in resettlement countries such as Australia, although a body of research does exist at secondary-school level (e.g., Miller, 2000; Matthews, 2008; Woods, 2009; Block, et al. 2014; Keddie 2011, and see Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012 and Shallow & Whittington, 2014, for case-studies at primary school level). This gap in knowledge and research is of concern since many young migrant or refugee students enter education systems in their new countries with little or disrupted prior formal education (Kirk & Cassity, 2007), in addition to a range of challenges relating to their pre and post settlement experiences, including possible trauma, dislocation, discrimination, challenges adapting to a new country and an expectation to learn a new language (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012; Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009). In some states and jurisdictions in Australia, young children aged below 12 years typically enter intensive English language classes or schools prior to beginning mainstream education, meaning that they face an additional transition process when they change classes or schools in the future, which could lead to increased risk of school disengagement if that transition results in increased stress or anxiety (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014).

In this report we provide an overview of research we undertook concerning the education, wellbeing and identity of children with migrant or refugee backgrounds who began their educational journey in the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) in South Australia (SA) while they were in primary school. The fieldwork and data collection for this research was undertaken from June 2011 to June 2014.

## 1.2 A note on Terminology

This report considers the experiences of both children with migrant backgrounds and children with refugee backgrounds, with reference made to “children with migrant or refugee backgrounds” throughout. This term is used to capture the shared experiences of these groups of children in relation to relocation to a new country, learning a new language, and acculturation. Furthermore, many of the nominally migrant students in the current study had experienced similar pre-settlement experiences to those typically associated with the refugee experience, including disrupted education and trauma, leading to what Woods (2009) calls “refugee-like experiences” (p. 86). Nevertheless, we

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recognise that refugee children may face additional challenges by virtue of their status as humanitarian migrants and their experiences of forced relocation (and see Ogbu 1978 for a discussion of the important differences between different types of marginalised groups in relation to culture and education, and Berry, 1997 in relation to the potential impact of forced migration on acculturation). Thus throughout the report we seek to address any differences found in our data between these two groups of young people, whilst also recognising the heterogeneous nature of the categories themselves.

## 1.3 Research Aims

The research aimed to provide evidence regarding:

1. **The transition of students out of the IELP and into a mainstream class.** In particular the research aimed to consider:
  - a. The experiences of students who exited the IELP and went to a mainstream class at the same primary school
  - b. The experiences of students who exited the IELP and went to a mainstream class at a different primary school
  - c. The experiences of students who exited the IELP and went straight to a mainstream class at high school
2. **The experiences and perspectives of teaching staff working in the IELP.** In particular:
  - a. How equipped teaching staff feel they are to deal with the unique needs of students with migrant and refugee backgrounds in the IELP
  - b. Staff perspectives concerning the transition experiences for students in the IELP
  - c. The benefits and challenges of having an IELP located at the school
3. **The wellbeing of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds within the education system, and their participation in the school environment.** In particular:
  - a. The self-esteem, self-efficacy and wellbeing levels of students in the IELP and in their new schools post-transition
  - b. The avenues of support students feel they have
  - c. The attitudes to education and school of students who started school in the IELP

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## 1.4 The Intensive English Language Program in South Australia

The Intensive English Language Program (IELP) is comprised of Intensive English Language Centres (IELCs) which are located on the grounds of mainstream public primary schools. The aim of the program is to ensure that 'students are taught English for social interaction and cultural understandings, as well as English language literacy skills for successful participation in all areas of the school curriculum (DECD, 2013). There are currently 18 IELCs spread across South Australian primary schools, which utilise specialist English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) educators in separate classes located in mainstream state-run primary schools. Students are eligible for 12-18 months in the program (with 18 months the standard for students with refugee backgrounds) unless a case is made for longer (through the Extended Eligibility policy). Students enter the program on a continuous, rolling basis, soon after their arrival in Australia (rather than only in one intake at the beginning of the school year). Students exit the program to either the same school as their IELC or to a different school, depending on the wishes of their parents and factors such as housing and job locations.

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## Chapter 2

# Research Project Overview

The study utilized a multi-method approach. These methodologies are outlined below, with the ethical considerations inherent in the project outlined first.

### 2.1 Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from both the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department for Education and Child Development. However, particular ethical issues arise in relation to working with children with refugee or migrant backgrounds, which we would like to note here. One of the most obvious of these challenges related to obtaining informed consent. Informed consent was gained from the parents or carers for the children who participated in the study, with information sheets and consents forms being translated into all first languages, and translators used to explain the study if parents or carers were not literate in any language. However, obtaining informed consent in this manner does not take into account the child's own willingness to work with the researchers or participate in the study, and this is particularly the case given cultural differences and considerations in relation to obtaining consent from adults or assent from children (for example, determinations of power based on pre-migration experiences, see Hopkins, 2008; Morrow, 2008). In an attempt to deal with this ethical issue, the first author explained the study to children in ways which they would understand, and outlined the different data collection methods, including asking them questions about what they felt comfortable participating in. For example, child-friendly activities were used to try and make the process 'fun' (such as stickers and drawings at the start of, or during, data collection), and these activities were also conducted to ease children into the research process if they exhibited any unwillingness or hesitation in participating (see Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2014). Further, children were never pressed to answer questions or participate in activities that they did not wish to complete, and verbal assent was always gained from the children. Despite these precautions, it is acknowledged that this process may not always reflect an autonomous agreement to participate in an activity, particularly where research is conducted in an 'adult' environment such as a school (Punch, 2002).

## 2.2 Research Sites

The research initially took place at three separate IELCs, meaning that the cohort of research participants initially came from one of these three centres. These locations will remain anonymous for confidentiality purposes, however it is important to note that the three sites were all located within metropolitan Adelaide, and as such may not be representative of all IELCs in South Australia. After transition out of their IELC, the children were located at 28 schools (25 primary and three secondary)<sup>1</sup>, all within the wider metropolitan Adelaide region.

## 2.3 Participants

Student participants came from 22 countries of origin: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Columbia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zambia. The mean age of participants was 7.4 years old, ranging from 5 years old to 13 years old at the start of the study. There was no statistically significant difference in age between boys ( $M = 7.09$ ) and girls ( $M = 7.69$ ). Further details concerning participants are outlined in Tables 1, 2 and 3 below.

Table 1  
*All participants included in any form of data collection.*

	Gender		Migration Status		Transition		TOTAL
	Male	Female	Migrant	Refugee	Same school <sup>1</sup>	Different School <sup>2</sup>	
<b>Participants in the IELP</b>	35	28	48	15	25	38	63
<b>Term 1 mainstream</b>	16	15	23	8	19	12	31
<b>Term 2 mainstream</b>	7	10	13	4	8	9	17
<b>Term 3 mainstream</b>	6	6	9	3	5	7	12
<b>Term 4 mainstream</b>	2	4	4	2	2	4	6

<sup>1</sup>"Same school" refers to students who exited the IELP and went into a mainstream class at the same school.

<sup>2</sup>"Different school" refers to students who exited the IELP and went into a mainstream class at a different school

<sup>1</sup> Data collection was not possible at all these schools due to a range of issues. Data collection with students in the study took place at 12 schools after transition out of the IELP.



Table 2  
Participants included in quantitative data collection

	Gender		Migration Status		Transition		TOTAL
	Male	Female	Migrant	Refugee	Same school <sup>1</sup>	Different School <sup>2</sup>	
<b>Pre-transition</b>	31	26	47	10	23	34	57
<b>Term 1 mainstream</b>	16	15	23	8	19	12	31
<b>Term 2 mainstream</b>	7	10	13	4	8	9	17
<b>Term 3 mainstream</b>	6	6	9	3	5	7	12
<b>Term 4 mainstream</b>	2	4	4	2	2	4	6

<sup>1</sup>"Same school" refers to students who exited the IELP and went into a mainstream class at the same school.

<sup>2</sup>"Different school" refers to students who exited the IELP and went into a mainstream class at a different school

Educator participant details can be found in Table 3.

Table 3  
Educator participant details

	Interviews		Survey	
	IELP and school principals/leaders	IELP teachers	Mainstream teachers	IELP teachers
<b>TOTAL</b>	4	4	9	8

## 2.4 Methodology

Following a participatory research framework (e.g., Gifford, Bakopanos, Kaplan, & Correa-Velez, 2007), this research involved several different data collection methods, as outlined below (and see Due, Riggs & Augoustinos, 2014, for further details).

### School Observations

Observations were conducted in both the schoolyard and classrooms in order to gain a greater understanding of how children interacted with each other and the broader school environment, which builds on previous research conducted by the authors (Riggs and Due, 2011; Due and Riggs,

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2009; Due and Riggs, 2010). As such, the first author spent one day per week for eight weeks at each of the initial three schools, with each IELC class being observed across the period of the day (with the exception of one classroom at one school where the teacher expressed a preference not to be observed). The primary purpose of these observations was to build rapport with students in order to develop a strong relationship upon which to build over the following years. These observations also formed an ethnographic data collection period, with the field notes contributing to the results of the study.

## Teacher Questionnaires and Interviews

All teachers and educators within each of the three schools involved in the project at the beginning of the research were invited to complete a survey concerning the IELP. The aim of this survey was to consider the perspectives of educators in relation to students' experiences of the IELP, the challenges and benefits of the program, and transition policies and practice.

In addition, IELC leaders, school principals and IELC teachers were invited to participate in face-to-face semi-structured interviews designed to stimulate discussion regarding the educators' experiences and perceptions of the IELP. Questions included: 'What do you consider are some of the positives/challenges/ or benefits/disadvantages of having an IELC in the school?', 'What are some of the things you think the school does well in terms of the IELP?', and 'In what way could the IELP be improved?'.

## Photo Elicitation

At the conclusion of the ethnographic period, students in the IELCs were asked to complete a photo elicitation task. Photo elicitation is a research technique which has been identified as a child-focussed, flexible approach to research that allows children's views to be communicated (Darbyshire et.al., 2005; Newman, Woodcock, & Dunham, 2006; Booth & Booth, 2003; Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2014). The children were provided with a disposable camera and asked to take photos according to a particular theme (in this instance, places or people where they felt safe). The children were then shown these photos on a tablet or laptop, and asked to discuss their images with the first author. Interpreters were used for this discussion as required. Given that the conversations revolved around images, photo elicitation was a particularly relevant research method for students acquiring EALD or younger children who may feel less confident in communicating verbally. Indeed, this study found that the participants typically enjoyed participating in this research stage, and the researcher ensured that they received copies of the photographs that didn't identify other children (due to ethical restrictions).

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## Student Scales and Questionnaires

Students were also asked to complete a questionnaire adapted from a number of standardized scales. These scales provided quantitative data regarding the trajectory of the students as they progressed through the education system, and their sense of wellbeing and identity. Specifically, amended items were taken from:

- The Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992) in order to assess the sense of belonging students feel in their new community
- The Australian Health and Wellbeing Survey (Bond, Thomas, Toumbourou, Patton, & Catalano, 2000) regarding education and belonging, risk and protective factors at school, and school engagement
- The Current Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Verkuyten & Thijs, 1997)
- The Multi-dimensional Scales of Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale (Bandura, 1990)

These questionnaires also included some questions about the transition process.

To assist with understanding the nature of the responses, response scales were demonstrated visually through the use of aids in the form of jars of lollies (one empty, one a quarter-full, one three-quarters full, and one completely full – see Figure 1). In addition, smiley face scales were used for questions posed in relation to happiness or satisfaction (ranging from “very happy” to “very unhappy”, see Figure 2). For example, the question “how happy are you at school” was answered using this scale.



Figure 1: *Lolly jar visual scale*

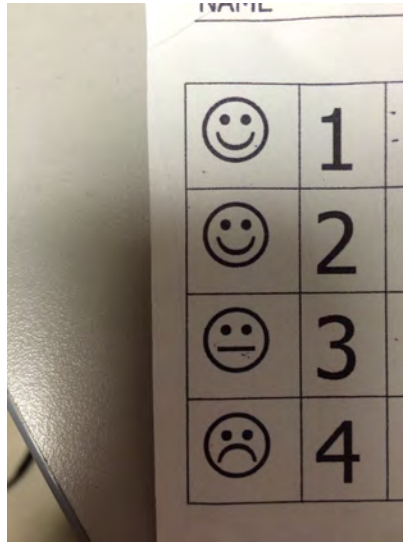


Figure 2: *Smiley Face Scale*

Follow-up open-ended questions were also used in relation to all elements of the questionnaire.

Students completed the questionnaires in the term prior to their transition into mainstream classes, and once per term thereafter while they remained in the project.

### Information from EDSAS

With the permission of DECD, some demographic information was collected from the Education Department School Administration System (EDSAS) in order to provide further demographic data for the study. Specifically, prior experiences of schooling (nil, pre-school, interrupted or continuous) and visa status were obtained, as well as the students' ages and year levels.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

Textual data (e.g., interview transcriptions and transcriptions of photo elicitation discussions) were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013). All quantitative data analysis was completed using IBM SPSS 21 statistical package (Armonk New York: IBM Corporation).

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## Chapter 3

# Students' Experiences of the IELP in Australia

### 3.1 Introduction

Existing research regarding Australian and international schooling for migrant or refugee children taking on English as an additional language or dialect (EALD) has almost exclusively been undertaken at secondary (or high) school levels (see, for example, Feuerverger, 2011; Keddie, 2012; Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2013; Brown, Miller, & Mitchel, 2006). This research identifies that many students with refugee or migrant backgrounds aged over 12 years old struggle in school, and are frequently 'left behind' in the system, with attrition levels in secondary school high (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Miller, 2000; Uptin, Wright, & Harwood, 2013). For example, Uptin, Wright and Harwood's (2013) study of twelve former refugees in secondary schools in Australia found that the participants in their study found it difficult to 'settle in' to their new school environments due to a range of factors including experiences of exclusion and discrimination, and research has indicated that migrant students have similar experiences (Woods, 2009). These findings are reflected in international research, which similarly suggests that attrition levels from secondary school are higher in immigrant students than 'local' student populations (Fischer, 2010; Motti-Stefanidi, Masten, & Asendorpf, 2015). However, very little is currently known about primary-school aged students' experiences of education in Australia.

In this section we consider the experiences of all students who participated in the quantitative data collection (N = 57 students; 47 migrants and 10 refugees).

### 3.2 Results concerning school engagement and happiness in the IELP

The quantitative findings indicated that in their final term in the IELP, students reported very high levels of liking school, happiness at school, liking learning and talking to the teacher at school (see Figure 3).

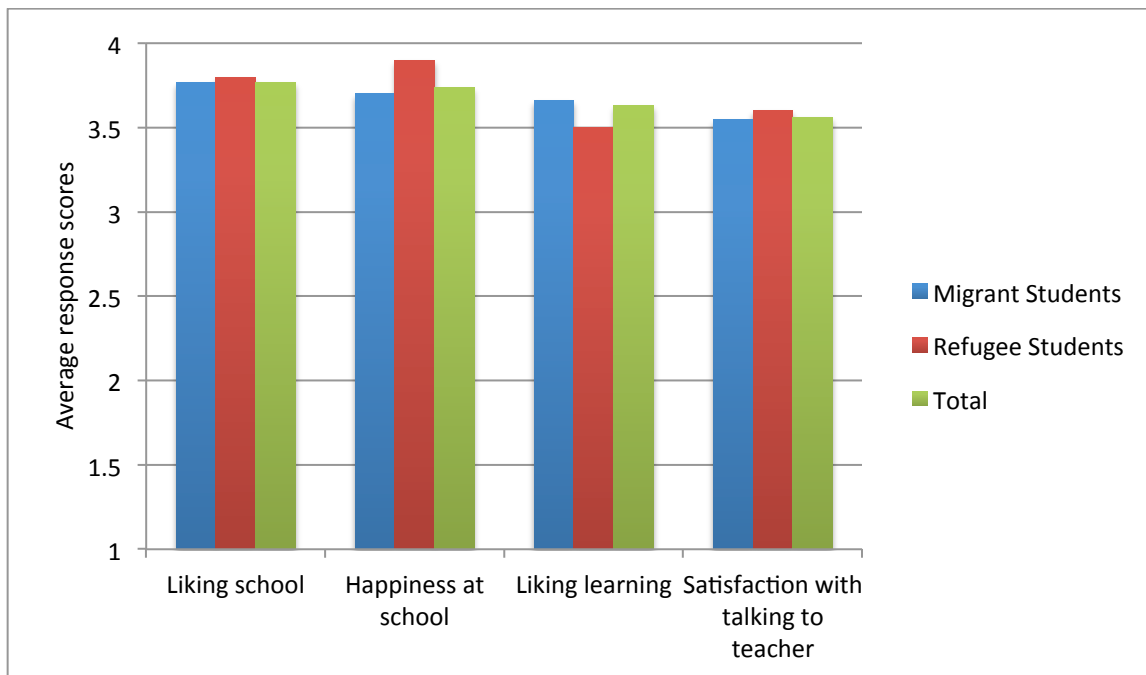


Figure 3: Student experiences at school in the IELP for all migrant students (n = 47), refugee students (n = 10) and total (N = 57), where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

## Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings found that students demonstrated high levels of happiness at school during their time in the IELP. In particular, students spoke about friendships, and indicated that they had high levels of liking school. The students indicated that they particularly enjoyed participating in subjects which do not rely solely upon English language competency, and which gave them an opportunity to showcase any skills they had developed prior to coming to Australia, even if they had no prior experience of formal education. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed two main themes:

1. Going to school is a positive and enjoyable experience
2. Friendships are important, but difficult to form

It is important to note that here, and throughout this report, pseudonyms chosen by the researchers are used to protect the identity of the students who participated in the research.

### Going to school is a positive experience

For most of the participants, going to school had more positive than negative connotations, and most students indicated that they enjoyed coming to school and rarely wished that they could stay at home. Most children stated that they liked going to school, and furthermore that they liked being in their classroom and learning “new things”. Children felt good when they were gaining knowledge at school, and commonly made statements such as: “I like to learn about things” (Dai, 7 year old boy

with a migrant background), or that they like to “do some work” (Layak, 9 year old boy with a refugee background). The students indicated that they valued the opportunity to learn within the context of the IELC. This was demonstrated particularly well by one participant, who when asked why he was having a great day, excitedly stated:

***Meng: A 5 year old boy with a migrant background***

*Meng:* Because I am very happy and I am happy for many more stuff.

*Interviewer:* What are you happy about?

*Meng:* About, know more many stuff.

*Interviewer:* So what sort of things?

*Meng:* Many stuff, and many and many and it gets more and more and more.

In addition, students also indicated that they felt strong connections with their teachers, and many students took photographs of their teachers during the photo elicitation stage. These photos cannot be shown for confidentiality reasons, however it is important to note that students typically indicated that they felt supported by their teachers, and that their teachers represented “safe spaces” for them when they were feeling distressed.

As would be expected, different students perceived particular classes as being more or less difficult or enjoyable, and this in turn affected how much they enjoyed coming to school on days when that subject appeared in their school timetable. Importantly, the subjects mentioned the most (such as art and sport) are not solely reliant on English, and have been noted in previous literature to be important in allowing children with migrant or refugee backgrounds to experience success and in encouraging social connections (Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009). Indeed, for many students these subjects meant that they enjoyed school more than they would have otherwise, particularly for students who sometimes found play times challenging. For example:

***Amera: A 7 year old girl with a refugee background***

*Interviewer :* And what do you like about school?

*Amera:* [points to happy face]. *I am going to build in art and go to PE. On those days I am happy.*

*Interviewer:* What about at recess and lunch time? Are you happy then?

*Amera:* [points to a little bit happy]

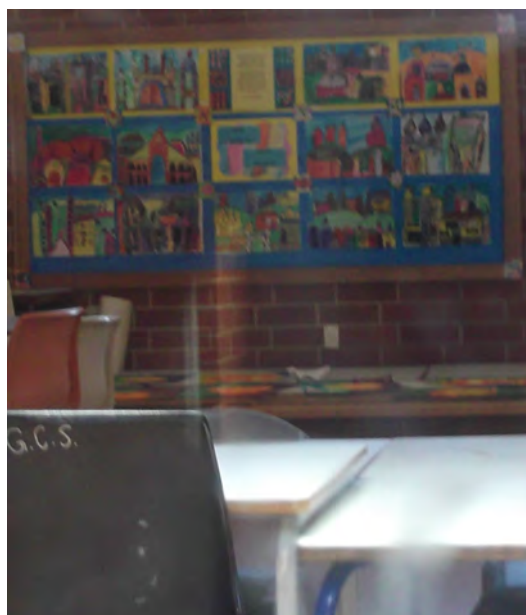
*Interviewer:* OK. Do you ever have a day when you feel sad?

*Amera:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* What makes you sad at school?

*Amera:* When the children said I can't play with you.

A further example of the importance of subjects that do not solely rely on English language skills can be seen in the photograph taken by one participant in Figure 4 below.



*Figure 4: I am happy at school when I have art. I like to do art like this.*

It is important to note here that we recognise that all formal subjects within the IELP involve English language development, and that as such these subjects do involve English. However, these subjects also provide an opportunity for students to showcase their skills even when they first arrive in the IELP and may not speak any English. As such, they allow students to demonstrate their skills, and build friendships with students with similar interests. An example of this was the way in which



many boys observed in the fieldwork were able to form friendships quickly – even without a shared language or any English language knowledge – through demonstrating their skills in sport (particularly, in the case of this research, soccer), and transferring these to the schoolyard at recess and lunchtime. This is important for wellbeing given the importance placed on friendships for students, as seen in the theme outlined next.

### Friendships are important, but difficult to form

When asked about liking school, students frequently highlighted that it was their relationships with their friends which promoted high levels of school engagement and meant that they felt happy to come back to school each day

#### ***Kera: A 6 year old girl with a migrant background***

*Interviewer: Points to smiley faces.... which one is you at school?*

*Kera: This one (really happy)*

*Interviewer: Do you ever have days when you feel sad like that?*

*Kera: No*

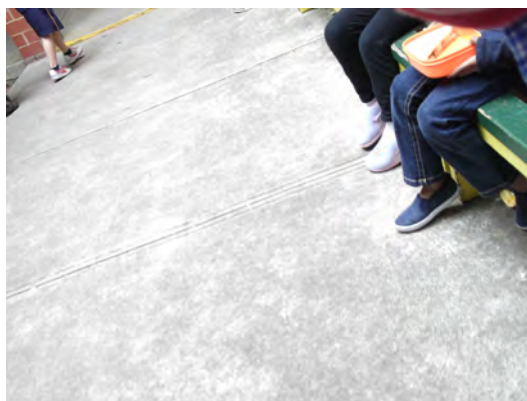
*Interviewer: What makes you feel happy at school?*

*Kera: Sometimes my friends tell me jokes and I tell them jokes*

Indeed, friendships were particularly important for the students in the study, and every student who participated in the photo elicitation took photographs of their friends. Photos showing identifiable faces cannot be displayed for ethical reasons, however the photographs below provide an indication of the types of photos children took, together with the ways in which they spoke about these.



*Figure 5: I like school because I can play on the oval. I like to run around and play running on the grass. I like to run fast with Assad.*



*Figure 6: These are my friends. They are from the same country as me. We can speak together.*

While many children placed great emphasis on their friendships, and generally reported enjoyment at school as partially revolving around the friendships they had already formed by the time the first spoke to the researchers, the majority nonetheless indicated that making *new* friends at any time at school was a difficult task. The perceived source of these difficulties varied, however often the participants indicated that it was because they found it hard to speak in English (for example, to communicate to a student at school without a shared linguistic background) or because they were shy. Some children also differentiated between friends and *good* friends:

***Dee: A 6 year old boy with a refugee background***

*Interviewer: Is it easy to make friends?*  
*Dee: Umm, yes, but it is hard to make good friends.*  
*Interviewer: Why is that?*  
*Dee: Just to talk to people is hard, well, but they just come and go.*

Finally, some children also indicated that they found it hard to make friends because other children already had friends and they were new to the school. It is worth noting that the students made no indication that any of the above difficulties stemmed directly from racial or ethnic differences (although children did indicate that they found it easier to form friendships with other children with similar cultural, linguistic or ethnic backgrounds – a point discussed later in this report). Nevertheless, the children in the study did indicate that they typically found it hard to form friendships, even in the context of the IELP. One possible explanation for this may lie in the rolling

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intake of the IELP, which may mean that students find it difficult to form lasting friendships in the program due to different intake and exit times to other students in their class.

### 3.3 Conclusion

The students in this study overwhelmingly indicated that they liked coming to school while they were in the IELP. As such, they showed high levels of school engagement, and this was particularly reinforced in relation to subjects such as art and sport, as noted above. This supports the findings of previous research, which has similarly found that supporting students with English language acquisition while also promoting their individual strengths provides the best outcomes in relation to wellbeing and development (e.g., Hatoss & Sheely, 2009). Again, we wish to acknowledge here that the formal teaching of art and sport, particularly within the IELP, does use English, and these subjects do offer an opportunity for students to develop their own English language skills. However, our argument is that since students are able to bring previous skills in these areas to these subjects (whereas by definition they are unable to do so in the case of English), these subjects provide students with a pathway to showcase their own skills, knowledge and experience in the school environment.

Finally, and in consensus with research emphasising the importance of friendships in enhancing children's wellbeing (Wentzel et al., 2004), easing the transition into primary school (Boulton, Don, & Boulton, 2011), and increasing children's enjoyment of school (Tomada et al., 2005), the children in this study drew support from the friendships which they formed at school. Furthermore, the fact that children indicated high levels of satisfaction with their interactions with their teacher frequently suggests strong relationships with teachers in the IELP. Given that previous research suggests that relationships with teachers are important in a range of areas, particularly for children with migrant and refugee backgrounds (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pugh, Every, & Hattam), this finding again adds to the evidence concerning the benefits of the IELP for this group of young children in Australia.

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## Chapter 4

# Transition From the IELP to Mainstream Classes

### 4.1 Introduction

Very little previous research has examined the transition process for students with migrant or refugee backgrounds into mainstream education. However, research with children more broadly highlights transition into school or changes in school to be challenging times for young children, with widespread implications for wellbeing. For example, a large body of research has indicated the transition from primary or middle school to secondary school frequently leads to declines in school engagement and overall student wellbeing (Goodwin, Mrug, Borch, & Cillessen, 2012; Akos, Rose, & Orthner, 2015). On the other hand, Stoessel, Titzmann and Silbereisen's (2011) study of transitions into school and kindergarten found that immigrant children in Germany benefitted from transitions in terms of their language and social development, with the authors suggesting that such transitions can promote developmental gains. In the Australian context, a review of previous research concerning schools transitions by Skouteris, Watson and Lum (2012) found that transition into formal schooling can be upsetting, but that peer relationships and positive relationships with teachers acted as buffers which allowed children to grow and explore their new environments successfully.

The sample sizes in this section are reduced from the full sample to consider only those students who participated in data collection at the first term post transition ( $n = 31$ ). The post-transition score was obtained in the students' first term after exiting the IELP, within the first half of the term (that is, typically during weeks one to four of the school term).

## 4.2 Feelings about transition

As shown in Figure 7, students expressed moderate levels of anxiety about transitioning out of the IELP (with a score of **1 = very anxious** and a score of **4 = not at all anxious**). However, students reported that they did not feel anxious after their transition, suggesting that the actual experience of entering a new class was less anxiety-provoking than the lead up to the transition in their final term of the IELP.

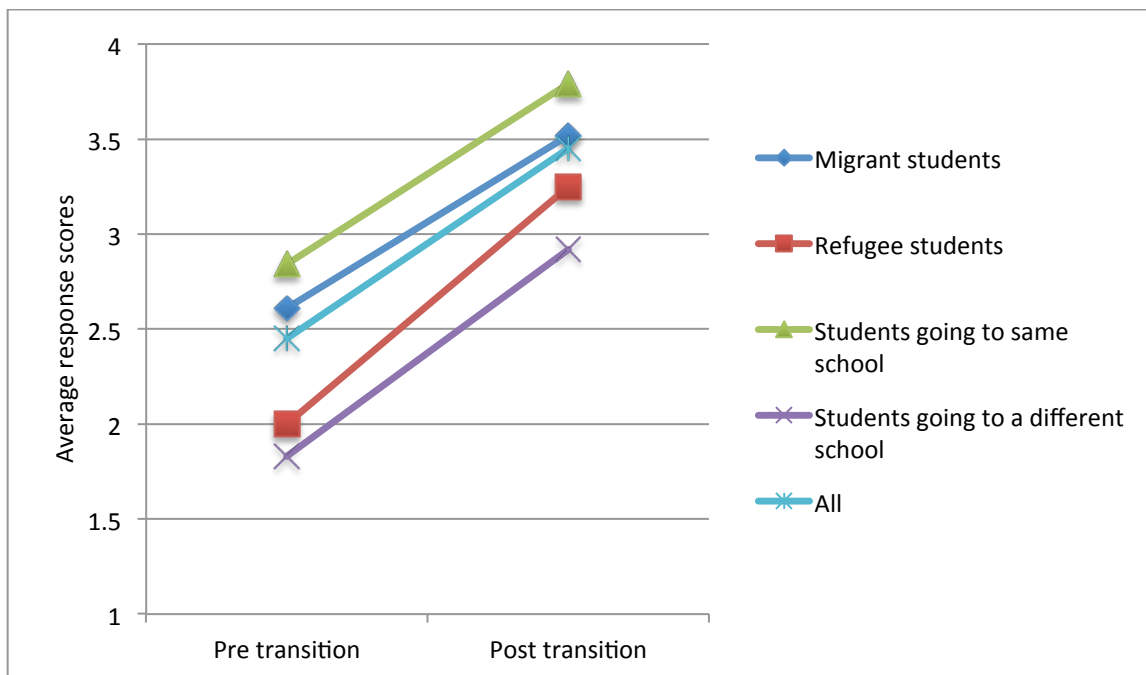


Figure 7: Levels of anxiety pre-transition and in the first term post-transition **with lower scores indicating higher levels of anxiety (1 = “very anxious” and 4 = “not at all anxious”**, for migrant students (n = 23), refugee students (n = 8), students going to the same school (n = 19), students going to a different school (n = 12) and all students (N = 31)

Students transitioning to a different school were more likely to report higher levels of anxiety than those transitioning to the same school, with this difference reaching statistical significance. Refugee students also reported higher levels of anxiety prior to transition than migrant students. This difference was not statistically significant, but a moderate effect size was found between the two groups of students.

## 4.3 Transition and School Experiences

### Liking School

Levels of liking school dropped after transition for all groups, with a statistically significant difference between reported levels of liking school for all students after transition than before transition. These differences can be seen in Figure 8.

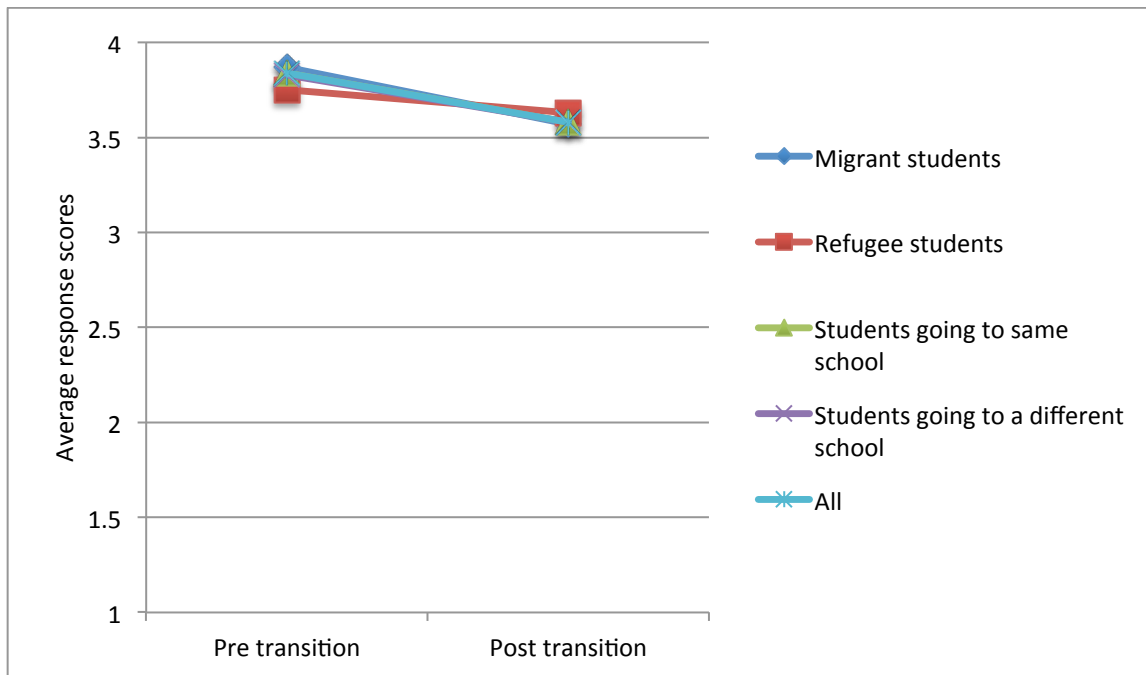


Figure 8: Liking school pre-transition and in the first term post-transition for migrant students (n = 23), refugee students (n = 8), students going to the same school (n = 19), students going to a different school (n = 12) and all students (N = 31), where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

### Happiness at School

Level of happiness at school also dropped after transition, with all students and each subgroup of students seen in Figure 9 recorded statistically significant lower levels of happiness at school in their first term in mainstream education. Students transitioning to a different school were also statistically significantly less happy at school than those students who remained at the same school.

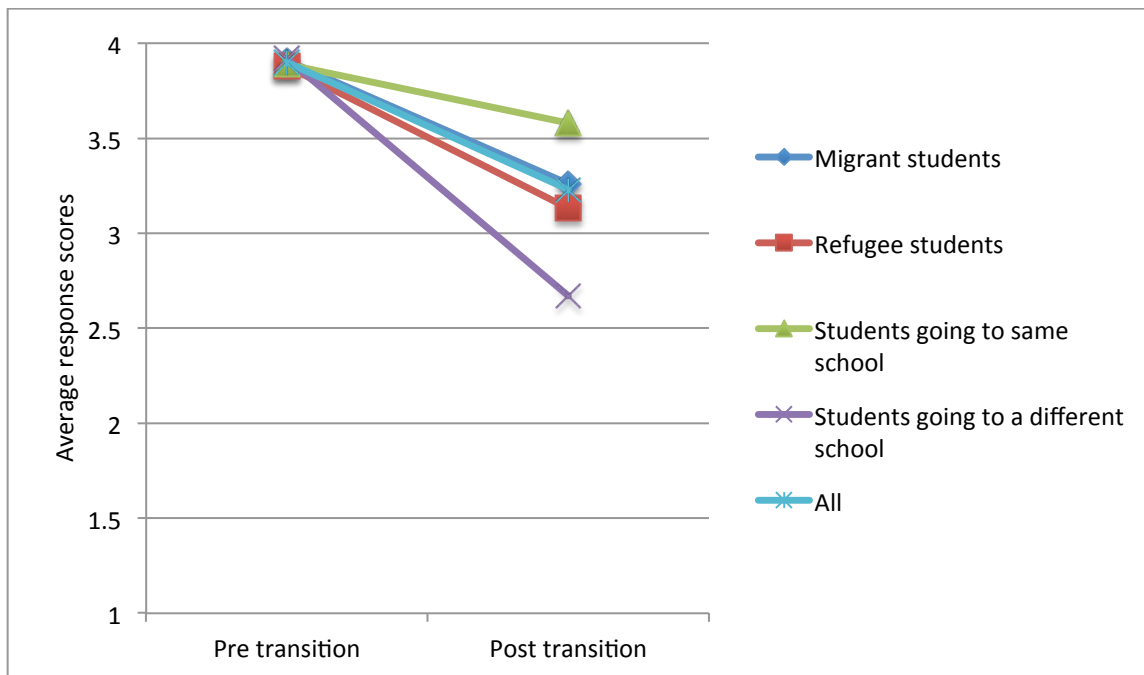


Figure 9: Happiness at school pre-transition and in the first term post-transition for migrant students (n = 23), refugee students (n = 8), students going to the same school (n = 19), students going to a different school (n = 12) and all students (N = 31), where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

### Liking learning

Students reported slightly higher levels of liking learning after transition (with this difference not being statistically significant, and only a small effect size found), and there was no difference between migrant and refugees, or students going to the same or a different school (see Figure 10).

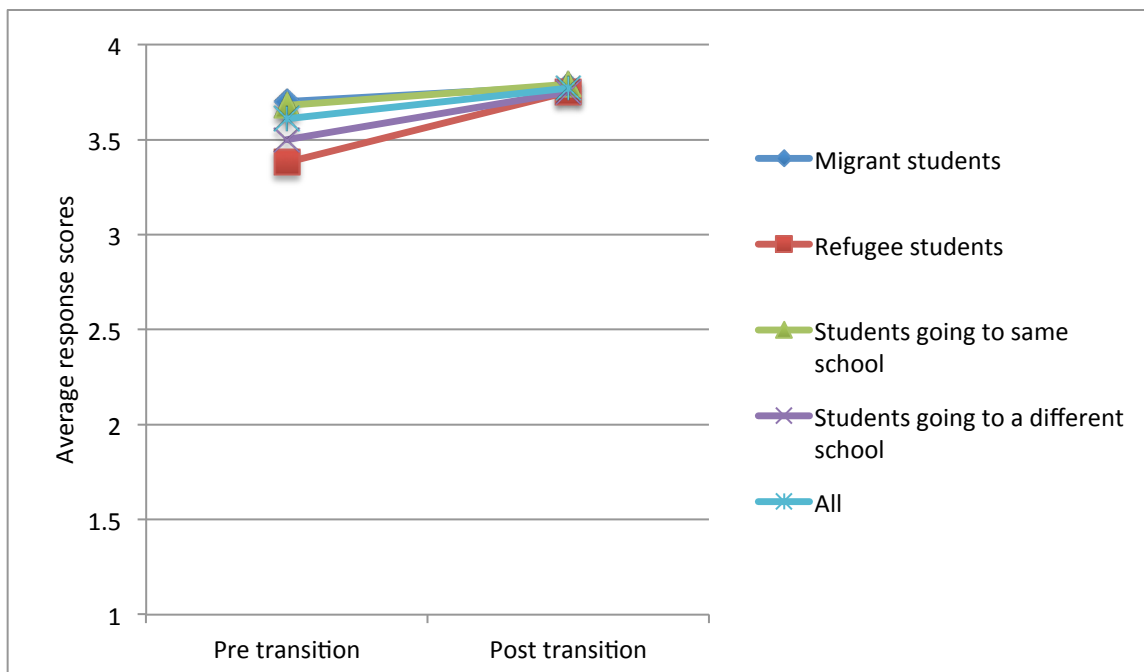


Figure 10: Levels of liking learning pre-transition and in the first term post-transition for migrant students (n = 23), refugee students (n = 8), students going to the same school (n = 19), students going to a different school (n = 12) and all students (N = 31), where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

## Satisfaction with talking to the teacher

As seen in Figure 11, there was an overall drop in relation to satisfaction with talking to the teacher after transition, particularly for refugee students, however this difference was not statistically significant and only a small effect size was found. Overall, however, students indicated high levels of satisfaction with talking to teachers both before and after transition.

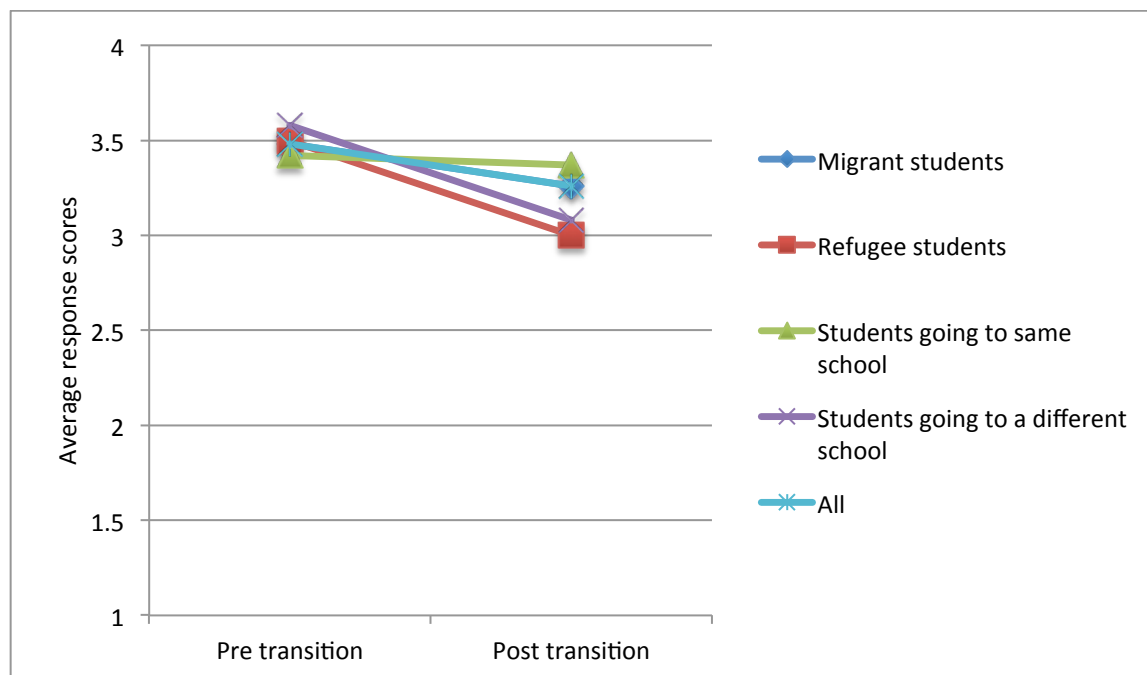


Figure 11: Levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher pre-transition and in the first term post-transition for migrant students ( $n = 23$ ), refugee students ( $n = 8$ ), students going to the same school ( $n = 19$ ), students going to a different school ( $n = 12$ ) and all students ( $N = 31$ ), where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

## Discrimination

Discrimination levels were low both before and after transition, however increased after exiting the IELP and transitioning into mainstream classes (see Figure 12), with the increase in discrimination being statistically significant. It is worth noting that discrimination questions, as noted in chapter two, were based on the Current Experiences of Discrimination Scale (Verkuyten & Thijs, 1997). The questions were amended with assistance from staff in DECD, and included questions concerning other children “teasing”, “calling you names” and “being mean” due to the country of origin which the child indicated that they came from at the start of the interview. For the purposes of this report, the responses to these questions were averaged.



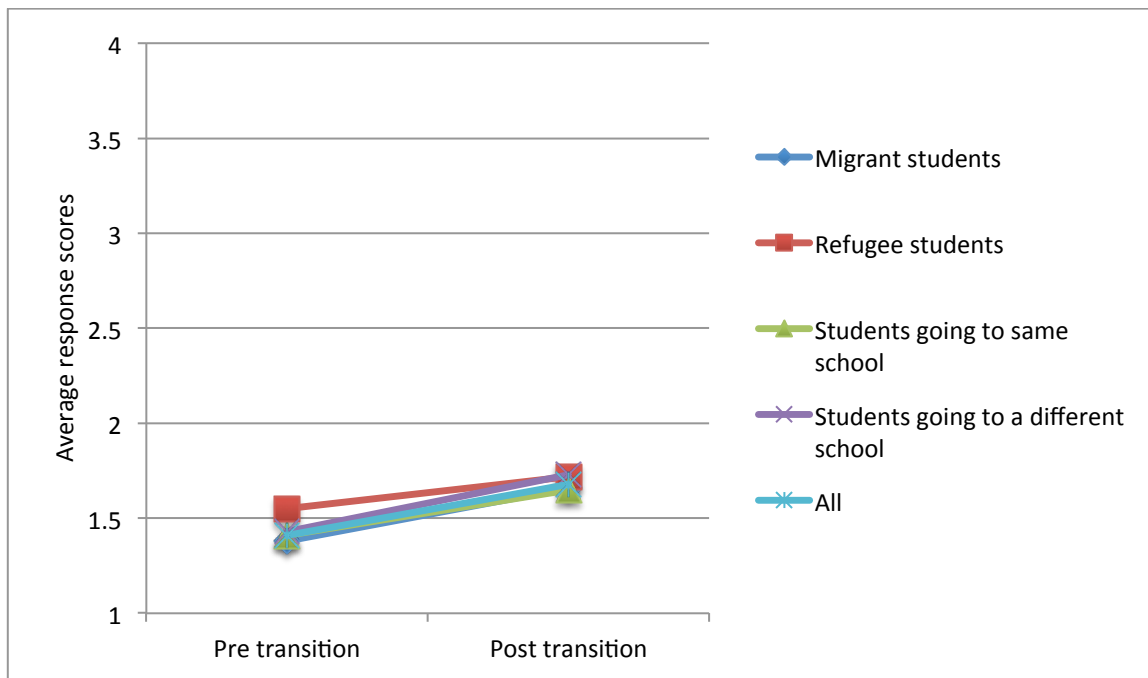


Figure 12: Levels of discrimination pre-transition and in the first term post-transition for migrant students (n = 23), refugee students (n = 8), students going to the same school (n = 19), students going to a different school (n = 12) and all students (N = 31), where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

## Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings supported the results presented above in relation to levels of anxiety concerning transition. Students indicated that they were anxious about transition, particularly in relation to forming friendships. As such, transition was particularly difficult for students transitioning to a new school, where they would be required to form new peer relationships. For example:

### ***Farah: An 11 year old girl with a migrant background***

*Interviewer: Are you looking forward to going to a mainstream class?*

*Farah: No. I want to stay here. I like it here*

*Interviewer: What do you like about it?*

*Farah: Just because everyone is like me. Like everyone is the same as me.*

*Interviewer: So you think it will be different in a new class*

*Farah: Yeah. I like this class.*

Correspondingly, students indicated lower levels of anxiety where they were able to transition to a different school with another child from their class. For example:

***Baheera: An 8 year old boy with a migrant background***

*Interviewer: I wonder if... they might have a big oval for you to play soccer on. Do you reckon? Maybe, that would be good wouldn't it?*

*Baheera: Hahaha yeah, If I had friends.*

*Interviewer: Yeah. You'll make some friends.*

*Baheera: Yeah, even [name]'s coming with me.*

*Interviewer: Oh is he? Ah that's good, that's really good.*

*Baheera: We will play together.*

Furthermore, transition was seen as particularly challenging for students who were transitioning straight into high school. For example:

***Ahmed: A 13 year old boy with a migrant background***

*Interviewer: Ok so are you off to a new school next year? High school?*

*Ahmed: Yes*

*Interviewer: How do you feel about going to high school?*

*Ahmed: Scared and excited*

*Interviewer: Alright. So why are you excited?*

*Ahmed: I have a new school. New friend. Is happy.*

*Interviewer: ....and why are you scared?*

*Ahmed: Because is new for me. So I get scared... and I saw some about my school information. Because year 8 is hard work I know.*

On the other hand, transition from the IELP into a mainstream class was typically seen as less anxiety-provoking where students were transitioning to the same school. For these students, some anxiety remained in relation to changing classes but to a lesser extent than for students transitioning to a new school.

The quantitative findings indicated that levels of anxiety about transition decreased significantly post transition, and this was supported by the qualitative findings. In particular, students rarely spoke about their English language competency post-transition. However, forming friendships again stood out as the main concern for students, particularly where they transitioned to a different school. For this cohort of students, transition was made easier where another student from their IELP made the transition with them, or where the school had students from a similar cultural or linguistic background, or country of origin.

***Hafsa: A 10 year old girl with a refugee background***

*Interviewer: How did you feel on your first day?*

*Hafsa: Scared. Because it was a new school and everyone was new*

*Interviewer: OK – so which one was you on your first day? [shows faces]*

*Hafsa: That one – it was an OK day*

*Interviewer: What made it OK?*

*Hafsa: I played with Bitan [a student from Hafsa's IELC]*

*Interviewer: Ok - great! And so have you made any new friends?*

*Hafsa: Yes, Maryam*

*Interviewer: Maryam? Is she in your class?*

*Hafsa: Mmmm..... no. But it is easy to have Maryam because she can speak my language and she is from my country. But I don't play with her because she plays with her friends. I play with Bitan.*

## 4.4 Conclusion

As noted above, a number of statistically significant differences were found in students' experiences of school pre- and post-transition. In particular, students were significantly more concerned about transition prior to entering a new class - with students reporting moderate levels of anxiety concerning transition prior to transition - but indicating that their transition went very well in their first term. This reflects the findings of other Australian and international research by Fischer (2009) and Skouteris, Watson and Lum (2012) who similarly found high levels of distress and anxiety in mainstream children entering formal education for the first time, and thus these levels of anxiety may not be out of proportion to those experienced by all children concerning school transitions. Similarly, previous research indicates that transitions into high school can be difficult for marginalised groups of children (Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000), and the findings of this research also indicate that transition from the IELP straight into a mainstream high school was a particularly challenging experience for students.

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Levels of liking school and being happy at school both decreased significantly after transition, suggesting that students experience a drop in these elements of school engagement after they transfer into mainstream classes. This is expected, and in line with previous research concerning transition within mainstream settings (Fischer, 2009). The qualitative results suggest that liking and being happy at school may drop in particular due to concerns around difficulty forming friendships – with students indicating that they found it easier to form friendships when they met other students with a similar cultural, ethnic or linguistic background to them.

In relation to facets of school engagement, it is of note that levels of liking learning did not drop after transition and in fact increased, although not significantly. This finding supports previous work by Uptin, Wright and Harwood (2013) and Shallow and Whittington (2014) in relation to the high value placed by many students with migrant or refugee backgrounds on their education in a resettlement country, and indicates that while students experience some challenges around transition in terms of their general experiences at school, they remain engaged in relation to their learning. This is also reflected in the finding that satisfaction with talking to the teacher did not change after transition.

While all students experienced a decrease in school engagement in relation to the facets of happiness and liking school after transition, students were significantly less likely to be happy at school after transition if they transitioned to a different school rather than the same school. Again, this finding was supported by the qualitative results, which indicated that students who transitioned to a different school found it harder to make friends than students who exited the program and entered a mainstream class at the same school.

This study also provided some support to previous research concerning levels of discrimination. The current study found low to moderate levels of discrimination, with discrimination levels increasing significantly after transition. However, while students spoke about difficulties with friendships as discussed above, they rarely spoke about experiences of discrimination despite being asked, and as such this research deviates somewhat from previous work concerning racism and discrimination in schools (see Walton, Priest, Kowal, et al., 2014; Mansouri, Jenkins, Morgan & Taouk, 2009). Part of the explanation for this may lie in the fact that levels of discrimination may well be lower in the IELP than in mainstream settings, together with the fact that students typically transitioned to schools with high levels of cultural diversity. Future research could usefully examine the experiences of discrimination of this cohort of students over a longer period of time and in less culturally diverse schools.

Overall, the findings presented in this chapter concerning transition suggest that the IELP offers students a range of positive support structures in their early experiences of education – including

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positive relationships with teachers, the ability to form friendships with other students from similar cultural, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, and an environment free from discrimination. However, students appear to face a range of challenges related to transition, leading to a drop in some elements of school engagement when they enter mainstream classes. As such, it would be beneficial to this cohort of students if the levels of support provided in the IELP were continued in their first term post-transition, even when they are required to transition to new schools after their time in the IELC. As noted previously, the IELP currently offers mainstream schools a range of recommendations relating to the transition of students, with the findings of this research suggesting that student outcomes would be improved if these are taken up by mainstream schools.

# Progression through mainstream education

## 5.1 Introduction

While there is a body of literature concerning transition for students within primary school, as noted in chapter four, very little research has been conducted into the progression of students through primary school – including in relation to ‘mainstream’ students. What research there is suggests that children’s levels of school engagement typically remain stable across the primary schools years – that is, if they begin school with high levels of engagement, these levels will remain high during primary school and vice versa (Ladd & Dinella, 2009). Other research has shown longitudinal relationships between academic achievement and school engagement, including in relation to immigrants (e.g., Li & Lerner, 2011; Motti-Stefanidi, Masten, & Asendorpf, 2015). Finally, research indicates that relationships with both teachers and peers are important across transitions to new classes and schools and through schooling in general, such that positive relationships with teachers and peers at school increase students’ motivation and engagement (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

The sample sizes in this section are reduced from the full sample to consider only those students who participated in data collection at the second term post transition (N = 17), the third term post transition (N = 12) or the fourth term post transition (N = 6), as applicable (and see Table 2 for more information). Given that the sample sizes at third and fourth term are so small, only the qualitative findings are considered.

## 5.2 Longitudinal school experiences

### Two terms into mainstream education

After the initial drop post-transition seen in the previous chapter, levels of liking school increased for all groups except refugees in the second term post-transition, as seen in Figure 13 below.

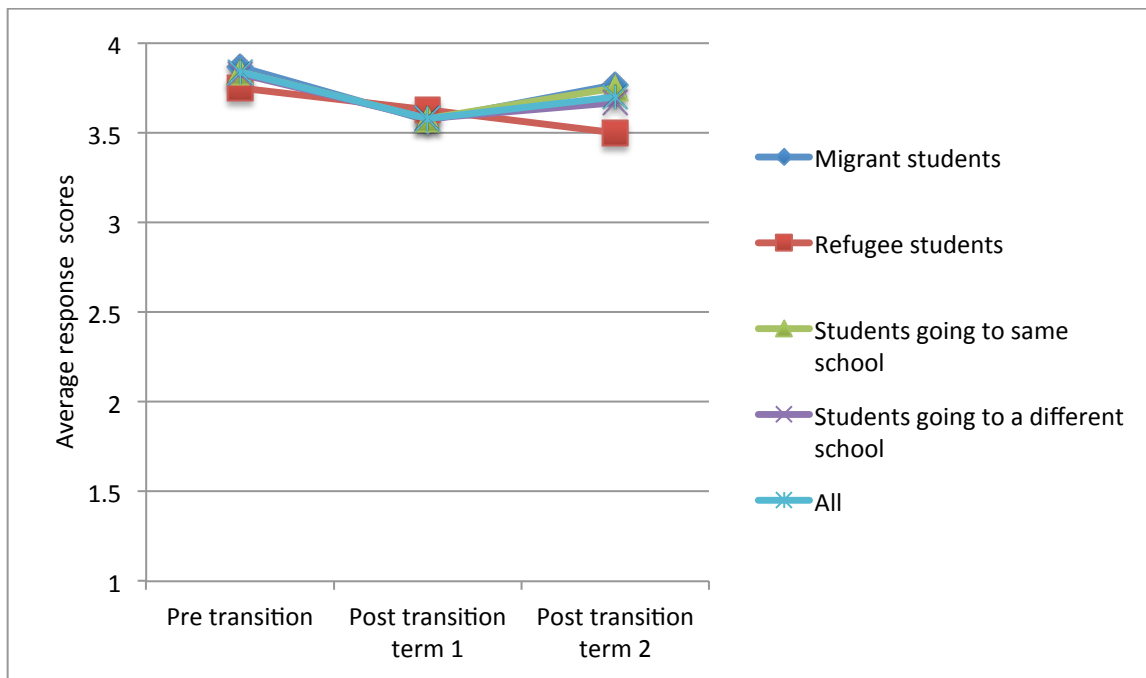


Figure 13: Liking school pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

In addition, happiness at school also increased in the second term post-transition after an initial drop in the first term. It is worth noting that students going to the same school continued to have higher levels of happiness at school in their second term after exiting the IELP. However, the size of the difference in happiness between those at the same school and those at a different school reduced in term two (see Figure 14).

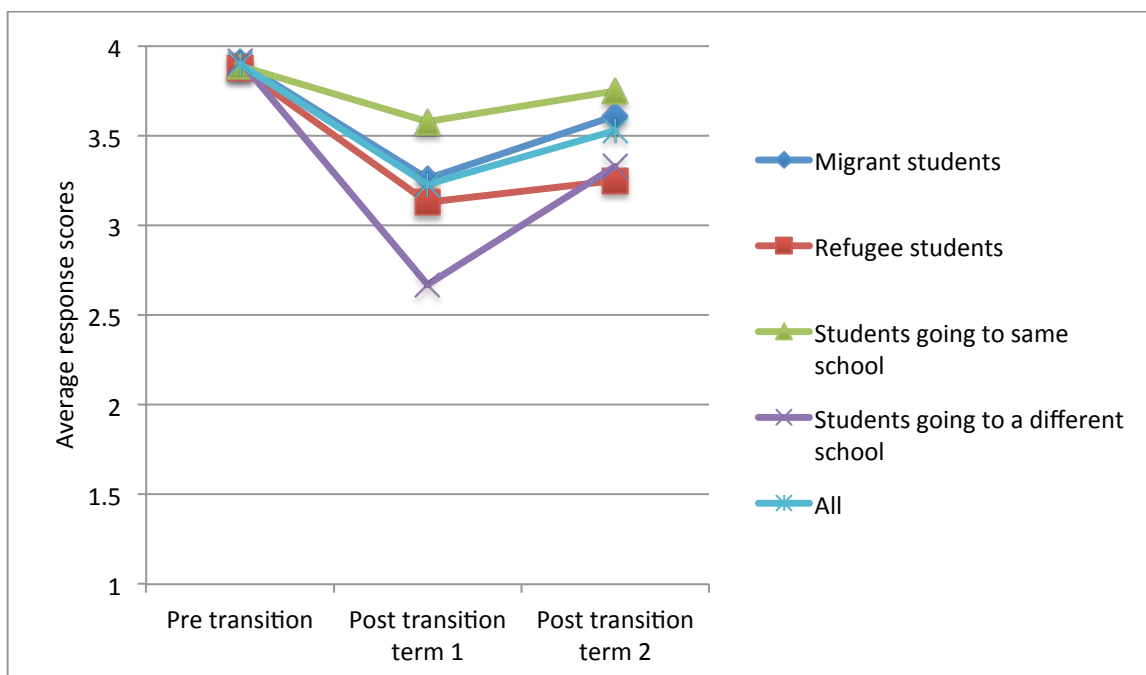


Figure 14: Happiness at school pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

As noted in the previous chapter, levels of liking learning increased slightly post-transition. This changed in the second term post-transition, where levels of liking learning dropped back very slightly for all groups except students who transitioned to the same school. However, these differences are very small and so essentially levels of liking learning remain roughly constant from pre-transition through to two terms post-transition (see Figure 15).

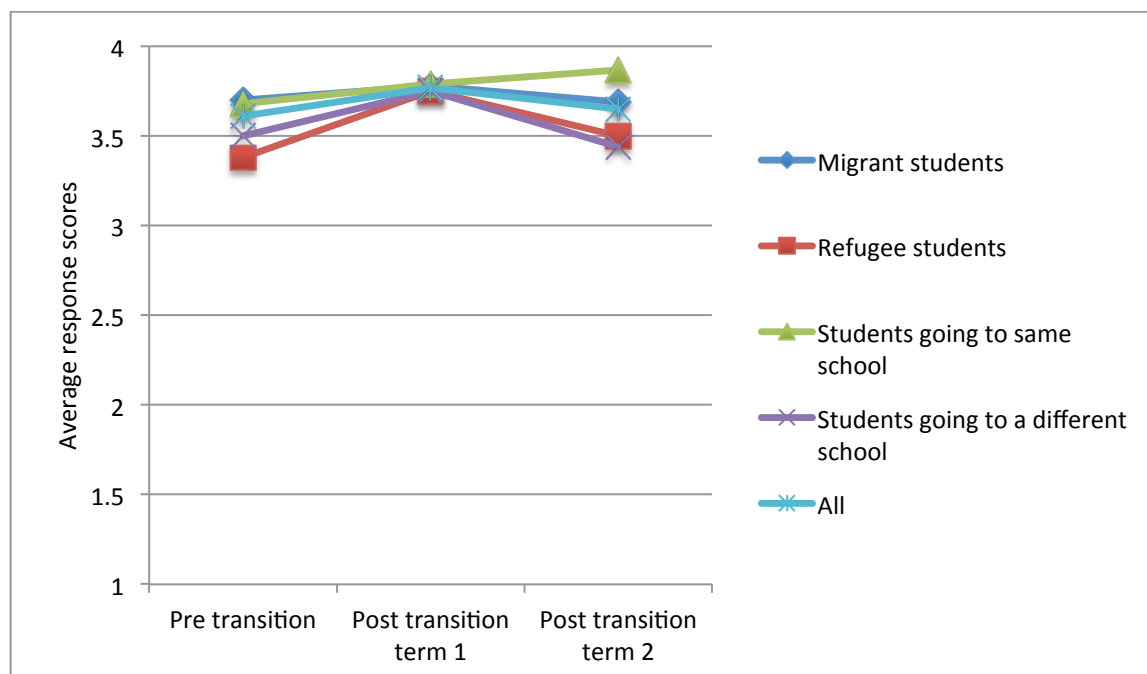


Figure 15: Liking learning pre transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

Levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher showed larger variability than the other factors presented in this chapter. As seen in Figure 16 below, levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher decreased significantly for refugees from pre- to post-transition, and continued this downward trajectory into the second term post-transition. On the other hand, levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher increased for this cohort migrant students in the first term post-transition, and then dropped to a level lower than the original pre-transition score in the second term post-transition. There remained a significant difference between migrant and refugee students in relation to satisfaction with talking to the teacher at both the first and second term post-transition. In addition, students who transitioned to a different school indicated slightly lower levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher than those who transitioned to the same school at both terms post-transition. There was no difference in satisfaction with talking to the teacher for any of the groups during their time in the IELP, with high levels of satisfaction for all groups.



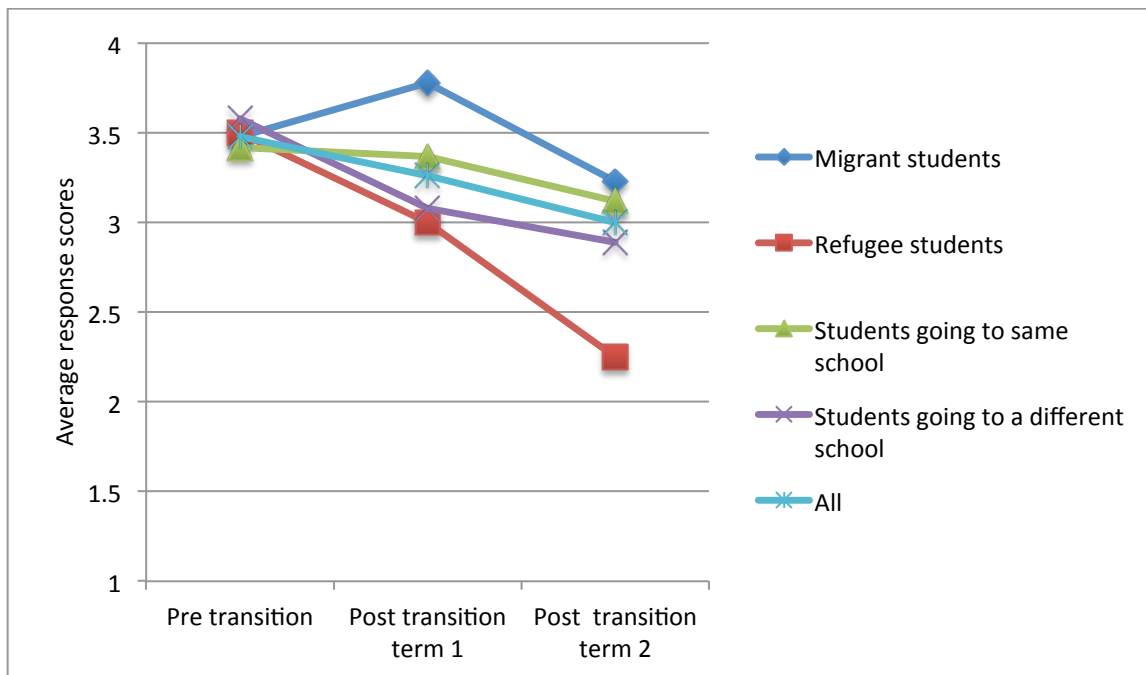


Figure 16: Satisfaction with talking to the teacher pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, where 1 = “Not at all” and 4 = “A lot”.

## Qualitative findings

Qualitative findings from terms two, three and four after transition indicated that friendships continued to be dominant in children’s discussions of school – both in terms of the importance of friendships to them as well as difficulties making them. By terms three and four, students began to indicate that they were friends with a wide range of children from within their school and class, and that their friendships were based on common interests rather than on shared language or culture (although this remained important to most participants). The follow extract, taken from an interview in the students’ fourth term in a mainstream school without an IELP provides an example of this:

***Thi: A 10 year old girl with a migrant background***

*Interviewer: Why do you think you are friends with the people you are friends with?*

*Thi: Cos I want to be?*

*Interviewer: So what about when you first meet them?*

*Thi: Mmmm not at first. At first, Kim is new at the school and I don't like her, but then after a while I see that she really is nice so we started to be friends. She is from Korea.*

*Interviewer: And your other friends? Where are they from?*

*Thi: Australia. We talk about crazy things. Fun things*

*Interviewer: OK so you have the same sort of sense of humour?*

*Thi: Yeah, yeah, that's right, and they like anime too*

Importantly, this broadening of friendship circles appeared to occur a little earlier for students who transitioned to the same school, with this cohort of participants indicating that they began to play more with children in their own class rather than their old class by around term two. This extract, taken from an interview with a girl in term two who exited the IELP into a class at the same school demonstrates this:

***Melek: A 9 year old girl with a refugee background***

*Interviewer: How much are you liking school at the moment?*

*Melek: Lot and lots*

*Interviewer: [Shows smiley faces]. What makes you happy?*

*Melek: Making new friends*

*Interviewer: Who are your friends?*

*Melek: [Names the same children that she named in the previous term: Maysa and Sabirah]*

*Interviewer: How did you make friends with Maysa and Sabirha?*

*Melek: Maysa is my cousin and she lives near my house and Sabirah I asked if she wanted to be my friend and she said yes*

*Interviewer: That was a brave thing to do!*

*Melek: Yes*

It is worth noting, however, that the extract above also demonstrates the utility of connections with children outside the school environment in forming friends *within* school (for example, in the above extract, relatives or people living near a child's house). To this end, children in the study often spoke of forming friendships with children from their weekend or after-school language classes, as well as

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Out of School Hours Care facilities, or living in the same apartment group. Indeed, living in the same apartment or group of housing was particularly important for children with refugee backgrounds, who frequently spoke of the importance of living close to other people from the same country as them, or who shared the same religion.

In terms of school engagement, the qualitative findings indicated that students continued to enjoy coming to school, and that subjects such as art and sport remained favourites for this cohort of young people.

## 5.3 Conclusion

The previous chapter indicated that transition was an anxiety-provoking time for the students in the study, particularly prior to transition. In addition, the qualitative data indicated that post-transition, students typically found making friendships difficult, particularly if they transitioned to a new class. The findings in this chapter indicated that while levels of liking school and happiness at school dropped in the first term post-transition, they increased in the second term. Indeed, levels of liking school increased to almost the same levels reported while students were in the IELP. Levels of happiness at school also increased to nearly the same level seen in the IELP in the case of students who transitioned to the same school, with a significant increase also found for students who transitioned to a different school. As such, the initial post-transition drop seen in these elements of school engagement may reflect anxiety related to beginning at a new school, and in this respect this cohort may be similar to students in more 'mainstream' settings who also struggle with transitions (Ladd & Dinella, 2009). Importantly, it is worth noting that while all other cohorts' levels of liking school increased in term two, refugee students' levels continued to decline, which may reflect the additional challenges faced by refugee students in Australian schools (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014). Finally, liking learning remained constant in the second term post-transition for all groups of students, supporting previous research concerning longitudinal studies of the trajectory of school engagement (Ladd & Dinella, 2009) and previous research concerning the high value placed on education by many students with migrant or refugee backgrounds.

As reported above, levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher were variable between the different sub-groups of participants. Importantly, students with refugee backgrounds and students who transitioned to a different school both showed downward trajectories in relation to satisfaction with talking to the teacher into term two, and this may be of concern given previous research indicating that relationships with teachers are predictive of a range of positive outcomes into adolescence and adulthood, including peer relationships, social skills, self-reported psychological

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wellbeing and overall mental health (Downer et al. 2007). The difference seen in the trajectory of satisfaction with talking to the teacher between students with migrant backgrounds and students with refugee backgrounds is also of note, and would be a useful topic for future research.

Finally, the qualitative findings in this chapter highlighted that friendships continued to be the dominant concern for the participants, also reflecting previous literature (e.g., Ryan & Patrick, 2001) concerning the importance of friendships for children, and particularly newly arrived young people (Gifford, Correa-Velez, & Sampson, 2009).

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# Chapter 6

## Students' Wellbeing at School

### 6.1 Introduction

Ben-Arieh (2005; 2006) notes that there have been numerous attempts at defining wellbeing in children, the majority of which typically focus on single or narrow criteria, and which lack the child's own perspective and experience. These foci are explicated by Fattore et al. (2005), who argue that traditionally, approaches to defining well-being in children have shared three main themes, namely; the need to meet particular developmental milestones, behaviour problems or other issues, and performance according to the goals of child institutions (such as schools). Both Fattore et al. (2005) and Ben-Arieh (2005; 2006) point out that, whilst these approaches have had some positive influence on policy, there are a number of issues inherent within them. In particular, Fattore et al. argue that the lack of *negative* indicators does not equal *positive* wellbeing, and that there is a lack of knowledge concerning positive wellbeing that reflects children's lived experiences and perspectives.

As such, knowledge concerning children's understandings of 'doing well' in more recent research has used participatory methods in an attempt to gain an understanding of how children *themselves* perceive wellbeing. In their research on wellbeing in children, Fattore et al. (2005) found a number of themes, including; positive feelings (such as happiness, but an ability for some children to also integrate feelings of sadness into an overall concept of general well-being), feeling safe, feeling that you were an 'okay' person, and positive physical spaces around them. Fattore et al. present these themes with the caveat that children will experience them in different ways at different times in their lives, thus again reflecting the importance of considering context when conducting research in this area.

Despite this working definition, it is also important to note that any attempt to define wellbeing must not only take into account the nuances of children's understandings of doing well, but also acknowledge that the term is culturally-bound, and by definition will take on different meanings in different countries, cultures, and social contexts, thereby requiring forms of data collection which are sensitive to changing contexts and meanings (Carboni & Morrow, 2011; Fattore, et al., 2007). Thus, not only were we cognizant of the need to consider the wellbeing of children *in their own right* - rather than in terms of their 'well-becoming' towards adulthood (Ben-Arieh, 2006; Fattore, et al.,

2007; Crivello et al., 2008) - but we were also mindful of the need to consider individual differences in what it meant for these children to be ‘doing well’ in the school environment. As such, in this chapter we consider what made children feel like they were ‘doing well’ in the school environment.

## 6.2 Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy

In order to provide an overall image of wellbeing in relation to understandings of themselves, four main quantitative questions were asked of students: “How good do you feel about yourself?” (to measure self-esteem), and three questions asking “how easy is it to learn sport/art/English”. These latter three questions were used as a method of measuring self-efficacy (that is, the strength of belief in one’s ability), based on the work of Bandura (1990). In addition, these questions were used as a spring-board for the subsequent qualitative questions, which form the main source of data for this chapter and which explored wellbeing more broadly.

### Self esteem and change over time

The self-esteem levels reported by the students were very high. There was a small drop after transition, however this rose again in term two. It is worth noting that the self-esteem levels of the refugee participants were significantly lower than migrant participants at all times points (see Figure 17).

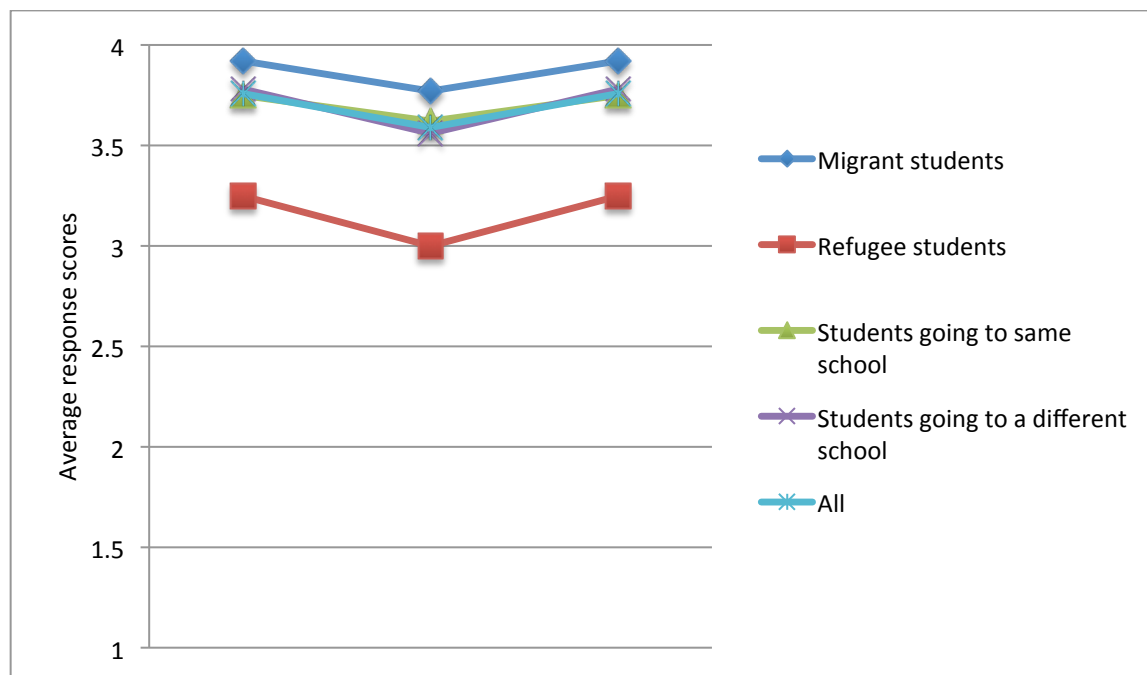


Figure 17: Self-esteem at pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, with 1 = “Not good at all” and 4 = “Very good”.

## Social and academic self efficacy and change over time

In terms of academic self-efficacy (that is, how well students felt they were at learning English, art or sport), levels were again high while in the IELP. This dropped significantly after transition, which is an interesting juxtaposition to the qualitative findings presented in chapter four concerning transition and the reduced level of anxiety found after starting in a new class or school. Term two saw increases in academic self-efficacy in relation to learning English for all students, although not to the same level reported while in the IELP (see Figure 18).

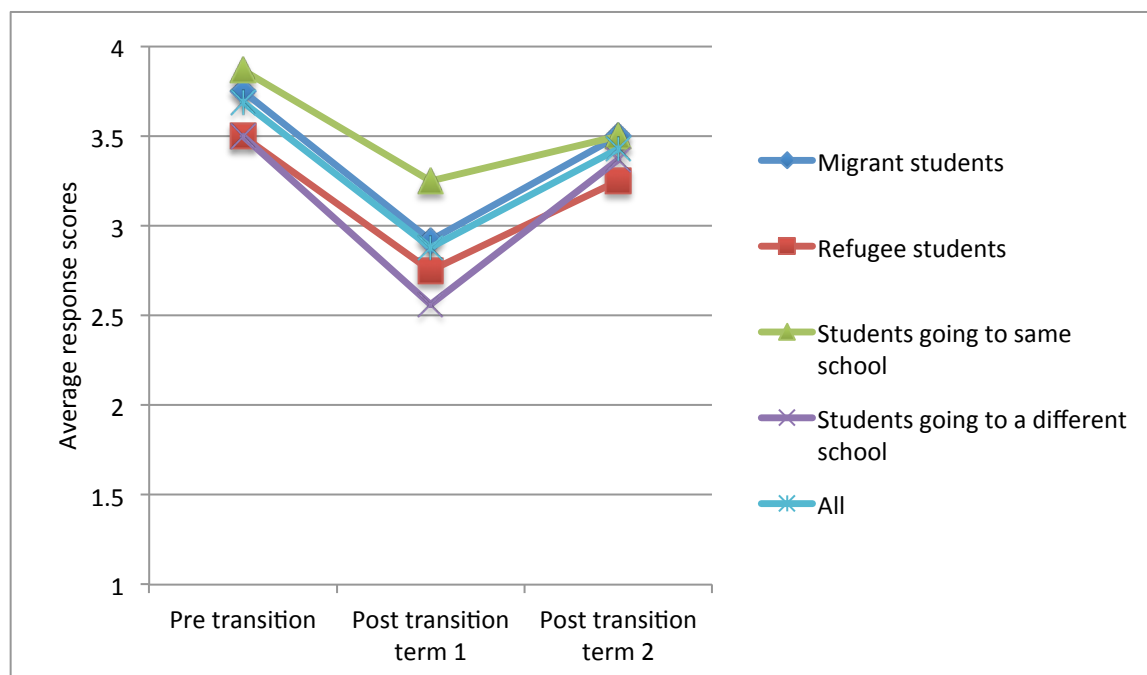


Figure 18: Self-efficacy (English) at pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, with 1 = “Not good at all” and 4 = “Very good”.

As a comparison to the above findings concerning learning English, students were also asked about how well they thought they were at learning art and sport (see Figures 19 and 20).

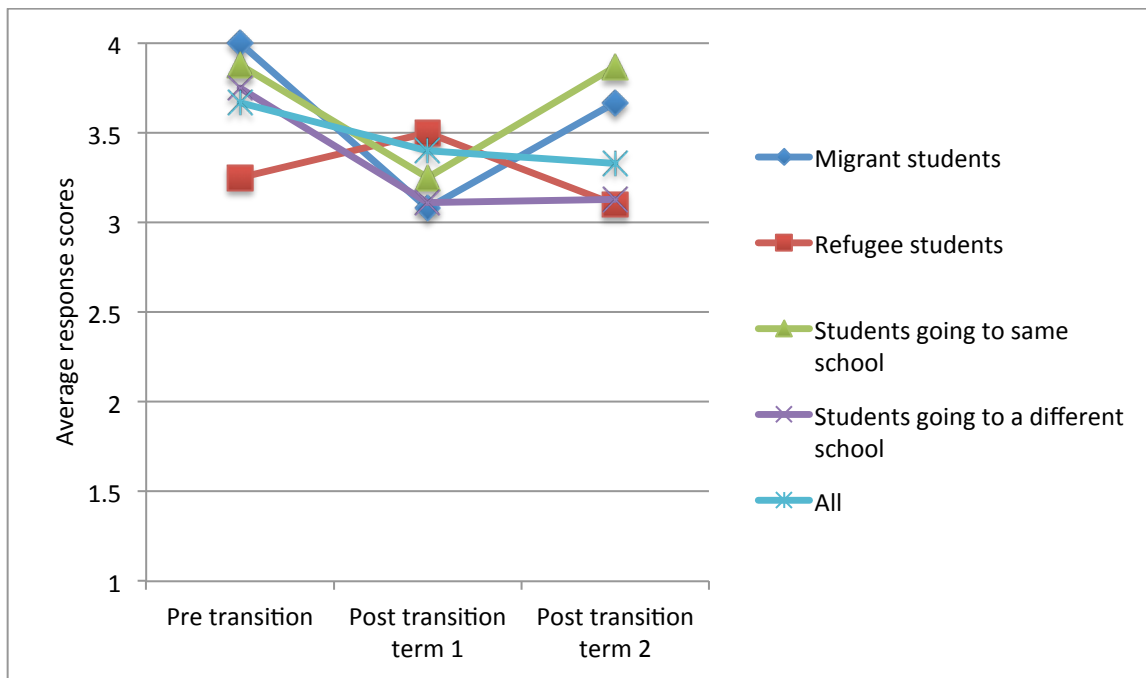


Figure 19: Self-efficacy (Art) at pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, with 1 = “Not good at all” and 4 = “Very good”.

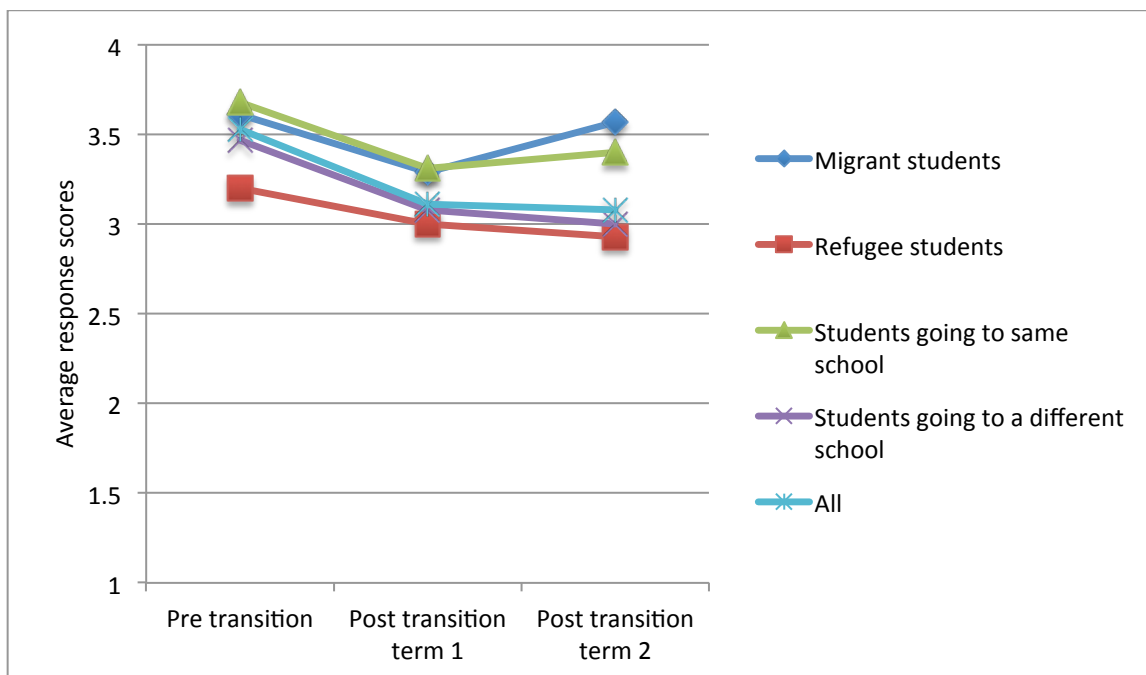


Figure 20: Self-efficacy (Sport) at pre-transition and terms 1 and 2 post-transition, with 1 = “Not good at all” and 4 = “Very good”.

As can be seen in Figures 19 and 20, self-efficacy in relation to art and sport were also reported to be lower after exiting the IELP, except in the case of students with refugee backgrounds and self-efficacy in relation to art, which actually increased post-transition. Again, students going to a different school report lower levels of self-efficacy in relation to both art and sport than students



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going to the same school. It should be noted, however, that self-efficacy in relation to both sport and art dropped less post-transition than self-efficacy in relation to English. Of note is the fact that that self-efficacy in relation to art and sport were more varied than the responses for self-efficacy for English, likely reflecting the fact that individual students may identify more strongly with one of these subjects or interests than the other.

In terms of the refugee students' increase in self-efficacy for art after transition, this finding may indicate that refugee students find more ability to feel competent in relation to art after transition if their English-based schoolwork has become more difficult for them (although we note that the actual formal learning of art in the classroom does also involve English-based teaching). However, self-efficacy in relation to art for refugee students drops again in term two, and self-efficacy in relation to sport drops for refugee students in both terms one and two, and in this respect these findings are consistent with the finding concerning liking learning, which also dropped in term two for refugee students (see chapter four).

### Qualitative findings concerning wellbeing

A number of themes emerged in relation to the qualitative findings concerning wellbeing at school. The most dominant theme related to the importance of forming friendships, and has been discussed in the previous chapters. Further themes which emerged from the data were:

- 1. Sharing religion, language and culture is important to students' sense of self and wellbeing within the school environment**
- 2. Children miss their families, relatives, friends and pets in their countries of origin**
- 3. Subjects which allow students to demonstrate their skills other than English are important to students**
- 4. Refugee students face additional challenges that impact their schooling**

### Sharing religion, language and culture is important to students' sense of self and wellbeing

Students frequently spoke about their religion, culture and language, and appeared to place a high value on opportunities to share these with other students and the broader school. An example of this is seen in Figure 20 below, where a student discusses why she took the photo seen below of her hands with henna decorations.



*“Umm it is my hands, and my culture, we do this. I like looking at my hands when they are like this. It is henna. Would you like some?”*

Students frequently elected to share information about their language, culture or religion even when they were not specifically asked about these facets of their time at school. In particular, students discussed a range of areas, such as food, the weather or geography in their country, ‘traditional’ clothes, and religious or cultural festivals and traditions. It is important to note that the schools with IELCs which participated in the research all provided many opportunities for students to share these aspects of the identity, including opportunities for parents to arrange cooking classes, or show presentations concerning a students’ country of origin.

### **Children miss their families, relatives, friends and pets in their countries of origin**

When asked how they were going at school, children typically indicated high levels of overall happiness and wellbeing at school, as shown in the previous chapters. However, many children indicated that they missed their families, relatives, friends or pets that they had left behind either in their country of origin or in transit countries along their journey to Australia. Some children indicated that they felt that this impacted their schooling in Australia due to negative emotions such as sadness or worry, and was particularly seen in relation to students with refugee backgrounds, as outlined below.

***Maryam: A 6 year old girl with a refugee background***

*Interviewer: So what about being at school, do you like coming to school?*

*Maryam: Yes, but I like Syria more. My friends are there. My dog is there.*

*Interviewer: What was your dog's name?*

*Maryam: My dog was good. A good dog. He liked food. He never bite anyone or hurt anyone. I think about him and what he is doing. He was with my grandparents. I like Syria because my grandparents.*

Subjects which allow students to demonstrate their skills other than English are important to students

Students frequently mentioned that they enjoyed their time at school more when they were undertaking subjects which do not rely solely on English language competency, and allowed students to demonstrate previously developed skills or knowledge. Students frequently indicated that such subjects made them feel better about themselves. For example:

***Hu: A 10 year old girl with a migrant background***

*Interviewer: So what about being Hu, do you feel good about yourself?*

*Hu: Yes. When I am drawing anime. I feel good then.*

*Interviewer: What else makes you feel good about yourself?*

*Hu: Art, sport, computing.*

*Interviewer: What about English?*

*Hu: Mmmm... no hard. I think other, other children are better than me.*

Refugee students face additional challenges that impact their schooling

Not surprisingly, children with refugee backgrounds frequently indicated a range of extra challenges related to their time at school, challenges which impacted upon their wellbeing. The children indicated that they frequently had some understanding of the events which had led to their arrival in Australia, and some children discussed how their worry about these events impacted their time at school. For example:

### ***Muhammed: A 7 year old boy with a refugee background***

*Interviewer: And so do you like coming to school?*

*Muhammed: Mmmm sometimes.... We have to do lots of work. I quite good but then bad things happen to me. Like I have a problems and stuff so I couldn't listen properly. And people like say bad things. In my country. My mum and dad and other people in my building say bad things.... Not bad really. Then they annoy me and they say you have an ear problem you can't hear properly. But I really don't. I hear the real thing and I am a bit worried. I always think about when will I die. People will die. And my mum says forget them forget them because my dad always tells me about them. Stories from real stuff like from bad people in our country hit good people and blood comes out. And people don't listen. Then I don't listen. At school I don't listen. It is hard.*

## **6.3 Conclusion**

The results presented in this chapter indicated that, overall, students reported high levels of self-esteem. These levels were lower for children with refugee backgrounds than for all other groups, and may reflect other challenges that refugee young people face (Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014; Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett 2010; Matthews, 2008). Interestingly, students' levels of self-esteem remained roughly stable across terms one and two, with a slight drop in all groups of students in term one after exiting the IELP. Nevertheless, students' self-esteem remained high. This finding adds to the literature concerning high levels of resilience in young people with refugee backgrounds (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett 2010; Keddle, 2011).

This chapter also indicated that student reported high levels of self-efficacy, despite the findings of previous chapters in relation to anxiety over transition due to students' levels of knowledge (particularly in comparison with 'mainstream' students). Despite these high levels, self-efficacy in relation to the students' ability to learn English, art and sport dropped in the first term after exiting the IELP (with the notable exception of refugee students and art). In terms of English specifically, this finding contrasts to the qualitative findings presented in both chapters four and five, which found that students rarely discussed English language competency after transition despite this area being a source of anxiety in the weeks leading up to exiting the program. Taken together, these findings indicate that while it may not be a dominant concern for students post-transition (for example, friendships may be more salient), self-efficacy levels pertaining to learning English do drop after transition. As seen in chapter five in relation to happiness at school and liking school, self-efficacy levels either increased or remained level in term two (again, except for refugee students and art),

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further providing support for the likelihood of students experiencing one particularly difficult term at school before 'settling in' to their new classes. It is worth highlighting that once again, students who transitioned to a different school reported the lowest scores. Finally, the fact that refugee students reported higher levels of self-efficacy in terms of learning art after transition provides some support to the previous findings presented in chapter three concerning the importance of such subjects in relation to students' overall wellbeing, in that art may offer students a buffer to other challenges in their first term post-transition. However, this area requires further research since self-efficacy in relation to art dropped again for students in term three, and since a similar pattern was not seen in self-efficacy relating to learning sport.

The qualitative findings in this chapter indicated that there were a number of areas that impacted the overall wellbeing of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds at school. The first of these built on the findings presented in previous chapters concerning the importance of subjects that do not rely solely on English language skills, such as art and sport. Such subjects appear to provide students with an opportunity to share previously developed skills or talents. In addition, the findings highlighted the fact that students gained a sense of overall wellbeing from the ability to share their religion, language and culture. In particular, students used the photo elicitation stage of the research as an opportunity to share information about their cultural, linguistic or religious background, as seen in the photo in Figure 20 above, indicating that students were keen to share this information about themselves when the data collection methods allowed them to do so. In addition, this finding provides support to existing practices within the IELP, such as saying hello at the start of the day in all the languages of the children in the classroom, and indicates that such practices likely increase the overall wellbeing of students by providing them with opportunities to share information about themselves.

Unsurprisingly, students indicated that they missed numerous aspects of their life prior to arrival in Australia, including family members who did not come to Australia with them (including both immediate family – mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers – as well as extended family). Refugee children in particular discussed their family members, relatives or friends who were not in Australia as sources of concern and sadness, with some students directly stating that these emotions impacted their ability to concentrate and participate at school. Furthermore, students with refugee backgrounds often displayed complex understandings of the reasons that they had had to leave their country of origin to come to Australia, including stories of violence and an understanding of the need to live in different countries (such as time spent in Indonesia). Many of the students with refugee backgrounds in the study discussed these issues as impacting their ability to form

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friendships with other students or to behave in the manner expected of them at school (such as concentrating, listening to the teacher, or playing in particular ways in the school yard). These findings support those of previous research in terms of the additional challenges experienced by young people with refugee backgrounds entering the education system in Australia (e.g., Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014).

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# Chapter 7

## Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions

### 7.1 Introduction

Previous research from both Australia and overseas has indicated that language educators working with children with migrant or refugee backgrounds play a significant role in the wellbeing and educational success of this cohort of young people, including in relation to both psychological and academic outcomes for students (Baker, 2006; Martin et al., 2012). However, previous research has also indicated that many teachers in countries with high migrant and refugee populations frequently report feeling ill-equipped to provide education to students from culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly students with refugee backgrounds (see for example Abreu & Hale, 2014; Tatar & Horenczyk, 2003; Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006; Whiteman, 2005; McEachron & Bhatti, 2005; Matthews, 2008). As such, it is important to consider the experiences of teachers working within the IELP in order to gain an understanding of the challenges they may face, as well as the benefits they gain from working with children with migrant or refugee backgrounds (Due, Riggs, & Mandara, 2015).

This chapter draws upon the data gathered from the interviews and surveys conducted with teachers and principals. The chapter refers to “educators” in recognition that not all participants were active classroom teachers at the time of data collection.

### 7.2 Strengths of IELP

#### Developing Whole School Approaches

The participants indicated that the felt the IELP was highly beneficial to the wellbeing and education of students with migrant and refugee backgrounds. Such benefits included the specialist knowledge that IELP educators bring, particularly in relation to the impact of possible experiences of trauma on the wellbeing of students with refugee backgrounds, as well as the type of challenges they may face as they settle into their new community. This expertise was also seen as beneficial to the whole school in that IELP educators were able to share their knowledge with mainstream teachers. This is seen in the extract below:

*‘...having another person on our leadership team with an expertise not just in a specialty area of the school, but responsibilities across the school in other ways has been a real bonus for us’.*

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The increased cultural diversity brought by an IELC was also seen to be a positive for the whole school:

*'...in some ways I think it almost represents what the perfect world is, you know. Difference is normal, which I think is fantastic'*

*'...people say to us that if the world could be like this all the problems would be solved'.*

### Students feel a sense of community

The participants stated that the IELP allowed refugee or migrant students to feel a sense of community in their new school, prior to entering mainstream classes. For example, educators felt that IELP students were unified through their shared experiences of migration and resettlement:

*...the kids support each other, you know, you can just see it, straight away they know how that kid feels coming into school'.*

This sense of community and mutual support was seen to facilitate students in experiencing a sense of belonging within the school environment before entering mainstream classes, where levels of mutual support may be lower.

### Smaller class sizes

The smaller class sizes in IELPs (approximately 15 students compared to up to 30 in mainstream classes) were viewed as providing teachers and educators with the capacity to provide one on one support to students, as well as manage the continuous IELC enrolments.

*I think the numbers is crucial, because like sometimes in my class of twelve, I can look around, and I might have every child doing something completely different to each other. So, you can actually differentiate according to that really specific need.*



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## A 'safe' space

The IELP was seen as offering a 'soft landing' for students. Educators identified that having IELCs within the mainstream school was the best possible scenario for students with migrant and refugee backgrounds. In addition, the IELP was seen as leading naturally into mainstream education, with less of a 'shock' for students.

## 7.3 The challenges of the IELP

### Administering the program

The main challenge of the IELP highlighted by participants was school administration. Examples of such challenges included the administrative load and classroom practicalities of continuous IELP enrolments, and the requirement to juggle limited classroom space and school resources when the numbers of enrolments were uncertain. Challenges that fell into this category were noted as something that the school faculty worked together to resolve and were already on school agendas.

### Limited resources

Due to the nature of the IELP and its requirement to respond to changing migration patterns, the IELP is affected by the policies and practices of both migration and education in Australia. During the course of this project, policy enforcement driven by an efficiency review and its repercussions were identified by participants as challenges in terms of restrictions on flexibility and their ability to respond to student needs 'on the ground'.

One such issue discussed by participants was changes to transport assistance for students in the IELP, including new maximum age restrictions and minimum distance requirements to access school bus services rather than public transport. In relation to this and other related issues, participants indicated that they had to make difficult decisions at a local level regarding resource allocation, and that they felt they had limited capacity to "have a say" in relation to policies concerning their students.

Several of the participants also reported challenges in the distribution of support services for IELCs through the provision for Bilingual School Services Officers (BSSOs). Participants indicated that the provision of these support staff was based on student numbers on a term-by-term basis in order to be responsive to the continuous intake of students. However, participants also noted that due to the diversity of languages within the classes there were sometimes difficulties when a family who spoke

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a language not spoken by others in the school arrived. Therefore, school leaders had to make decisions regarding the distribution of allocated funding for extra support for families, which one participant indicated sometimes meant making “tough decisions”.

### Transition into mainstream classes

Transition (particularly if it was to a different school) was seen as a difficult time for students and one of the main challenges of the program. The experience of transition to a different school was described as ‘a bit of a culture shock’. In particular, educators expressed concern relating to student wellbeing, including that their overall students’ feelings of belonging may be disrupted and that the change could be distressing. Participants also raised concerns about their English language and academic competencies. For example:

*...a lot of our kids, despite the fact that they exit at what's called a recommended exit level it's still well below that of a mainstream or of an Australian born child. So, um, I think getting the ah – having schools understand that they're just, that they've completed the beginning of their learning, that they've still got more learning and English to do, so they still need extra support. Some schools that they exit to don't have even an ESL teacher or SSO's to support them, you know they don't have a lot of extra support because they're a school that don't have many students like that so they don't provide, they don't have the provision for it. Um you know for some kids just that change is challenging, um change can be really challenging.*

The lack of resources in mainstream schools was therefore seen as a challenge to successful transitions to mainstream classes, and participants expressed concern that students would struggle outside the ‘safe space’ of the IELC classroom.

*It's a big shift to go from these lovely cosy little classrooms into sometimes a class of thirty and no BSSO support, maybe one ESL teacher in an hour a week and whatever wherever they do it supporting them, so I suspect that the transition – yeah probably transition [to an external school] is something I think we don't do all that well actually.*

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Participants also noted that positive experiences of transition to a new school depended upon the school to which students transitioned. In particular, it was noted that offers were made from the IELC for staff from receiving schools to visit, but that these were rarely taken up. Teachers identified that they understood the time constraints on mainstream schools – and that they felt they couldn't impose – but that transitions could be better managed if mainstream schools offered more comprehensive transition support.

Further, it was indicated that where-ever possible, transitions to classes at the same school were desirable, and this echoes the findings of previous chapters concerning the experiences reported by students themselves.

*If they exit here it's ideal because they're already familiar with the school and we can do transition over a whole term before they start so it's a much longer and ah a truly, um a true transition, you know, a beneficial transition, it's over time and they really do get to know their kids and the teacher and the expectations that the curriculum is going to place upon them.*

### Students with learning difficulties

Educators indicated that learning difficulties impacted upon their classrooms through creating added complexities to already complex environments. However, many participants also acknowledged that the IELP environment was able to facilitate the identification, diagnosis and response to students with learning difficulties who are newly arrived in Australia and have limited English language skills. In particular, participants identified that the IELP classroom practices were conducive to assisting students with learning difficulties, particularly in relation to visual aids that were already in use for developing English language skills. Nevertheless, IELP educators acknowledged that there were unique difficulties in identifying learning disorders amongst students with migrant or refugee backgrounds. As stated by one participant: 'It often takes six months before you really know if that child - whether it's just a language issue or whether it's actually a learning issue'

The participants also expressed a general concern that lack of intercultural understanding in mainstream educators as well as mainstream class size and classroom demands would place students with migrant or refugee backgrounds at risk of mis- (or non-) diagnosis. This is supported by Booth (2007) who argues that diagnosis of learning difficulties in students with migrant or refugee backgrounds begins with educators' ability to query potential learning difficulties within multiple

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masking factors, and further emphasises the importance of developed teacher/student relationships. This complexity is highlighted in the following extract:

*Cause sometimes you're thinking; "mmm, is that lack of education, is it just personality as in not really fitting into this environment quickly or are there disabilities behind all this", and of course trying to work it out. Through a second language, through all those other factors it can just be a bit of a challenge sometimes.*

In addition, teacher-parent communication regarding possible learning difficulties was considered somewhat problematic by the participants, requiring cultural sensitivity to socio-cultural perspectives of learning difficulties and intellectual disability. Participants suggested that parents may be resistant to diagnoses due to concerns that diagnoses may impact visa status, concerns that students may be removed from school, and concerns that parents may be seen as to 'blame' for the child's diagnosis (for example, that the parents may be blamed for malnourishment which resulted in developmental delays).

## 7.4 Conclusion

As seen in this chapter, the educators who participated in this research saw a number of strengths in the IELP for students with migrant or refugee backgrounds, including a learning environment sensitive to newly arrived students' recent and immediate circumstances, smaller specialist classes allowing for explicit teaching and curriculum differentiation, and the opportunity for students to obtain an insight into mainstream educational expectations. These findings are summed up succinctly in one quote from an educator in relation to the IELP – that it offers this cohort of students a “soft landing” from which to begin their education in Australia. As such, the findings presented in this chapter reflect those of the previous chapters in this report concerning the experience of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds, who consistently reported high levels of elements of school engagement and wellbeing while in the IELP.

However, the educators who participated in the research also identified a range of challenges in relation to the IELP - although it is worth noting that some of these challenges relate to issues which are typically experienced in any institutional environment (such as those relating to limited resources). For example, participants noted that they felt that they had little input into higher-level policy development, and that this sometimes impacted their ability to provide for the students as they would like. Participants also identified that the increased complexity resulting from learning disorders also impacted upon their teaching, although they also felt that students with migrant or refugee

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backgrounds could be identified more easily within the IELP than they would if they began their education in Australia in a mainstream class. It is worth noting, however, that specialised support should be offered to students with additional needs where it is available at school – particularly since the purpose of the IELP is to provide students with English language support and resources.

Finally, the participants in this chapter identified benefits for the whole school community from having an IELC at the school, particularly in relation to the increase in cultural diversity, the extra resources that the program brought to the school, and the specialist knowledge that IELP teachers were able to share with other educators in their school. Arguably, these whole school benefits are consistent with whole school approaches to education – that is, approaches which are ‘embedded deeply in the very foundation of the school, in its missions, its belief system, and its daily activities’ (Levin, 1997, p. 390), and which take into account the social situation and interaction of all members of the school environment. Previous research has identified strong benefits to all members of the school community where whole school approaches are present (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012), and the findings present in this report support the benefits of such approaches, provided that they also focused on the wellbeing of students in the IELP and maximised the limited time which students have the program.

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# Chapter 8

## Conclusion

### 8.1 Summary of findings

Overall, this report indicates that the IELP in South Australia provides students with migrant or refugee backgrounds with a solid foundation in which to begin their education in Australia, and offers a range of benefits relating to the wellbeing of this group of young people. In particular, the students who participated in the research reported high levels of school engagement, including levels of liking school, happiness at school and liking learning, and typically formed friendships and teacher relationships which they found to be supportive while in the program.

Some of the most important findings stemming from the results documented in this report are those related to transition out of the IELP and into a mainstream education setting (whether at the same school or a different one). A number of significant differences were found in students' experiences of school pre- and post-transition. In particular, students were significantly more concerned about transition prior to entering a new class - with students reporting moderate levels of anxiety concerning transition prior to transition - but indicating that their transition went very well in their first term. This reflects the findings of research by Fischer (2009) and Skouteris, Watson and Lum (2012) who similarly found high levels of distress and anxiety in mainstream children entering formal education for the first time, and thus these levels of anxiety may not be out of proportion to those experienced by all children concerning school transitions. Nevertheless, the fact that indicators of school engagement and wellbeing do drop in the first term post-transition indicate that more support could be provided at around the time students exit the IELP, and during their first term post-transition, as outlined in Recommendation 2.

In particular, levels of liking school and being happy at school both decreased significantly after transition, suggesting that students experience a drop in these elements of school engagement after they transfer into mainstream classes. Again, this is expected, and in line with previous research concerning transition within mainstream settings (Fischer, 2009). The qualitative results suggest that liking and being happy at school may drop in particular due to concerns over English language competency and difficulty forming friendships, and this is supported by the findings concerning self-efficacy. These results also support previous research which has indicated that social inclusion is an

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issue for students with migrant or refugee backgrounds in high schools (Farhadi & Robinson, 2008; Uptin, Wright & Harwood, 2013; Hatoss, O'Neill, & Eacersall, 2012), and indicates that while the IELP may offer students a safe environment in which to initially enter school in Australia (Pugh, Every and Hattam, 2012), the transition process remains a potential stressor for this group of young people. Furthermore, it is also important to note that previous research conducted in other states and jurisdictions in Australia has suggested that students are frequently transitioned out of intensive English programs early due to policy and financial constraints, and may therefore face increased challenges in mainstream education (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Hatoss, O'Neill, & Eacersall, 2012). As such, the current policy in South Australia concerning extended eligibility, as well as the routine 18 months offered to students with refugee backgrounds, provide an important element of flexibility in supporting students prior to entering mainstream education.

While all students experienced a decrease in school engagement after transition, students were significantly less likely to be happy after transition if they transitioned to a different school rather than the same school. Again, this finding was supported by the qualitative results, which indicated that students who transitioned to a different school found it harder to make friends than students who changed into a mainstream class at the same school. As such, policies which attempt to keep students at the same school where possible may be beneficial to the school engagement and wellbeing of students with migrant or refugee backgrounds. This may be particularly important in relation to providing students with the opportunity to maintain existing peer and teacher relationships in the school context, with previous research highlighting that supportive relationships with peers and teachers are critically important for the wellbeing of young people at school (Dockett & Perry, 2003). However, we acknowledge that remaining at the same school is not practical for many students, for a variety of reasons including the mobility of many families with refugee backgrounds (particularly in relation to finding affordable housing and employment). As such, support around transition is important, as noted above. This is particularly the case for refugee students, who had the lowest levels of school engagement indicators and who experience additional stressors which may impact their time at school.

In the context of the drop in levels of liking and being happy at school, it is of note that levels of liking learning did not drop after transition and in fact increased, although not significantly. This finding supports previous work by Uptin, Wright and Harwood (2013) and Shallow and Whittington (2014) in relation to the high value placed by many students with migrant and refugee backgrounds on their education in a resettlement country, and indicates that while students experience some challenges around transition in terms of their general experiences at school, they remain engaged in relation to their learning. This is also reflected in the finding that levels of satisfaction with talking to the teacher did not change after transition. This is an important finding since previous research has indicated

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that school engagement levels remain relatively stable across school years (Ladd and Dinella, 2009), and as such this research indicates that this group of students are likely to remain highly engaged in school into their secondary school years. Again, this provides support for the IELP in terms of the program offering students a strong and supportive start to their schooling in Australia.

The findings documented in this report also provide some support for previous research with older students concerning levels of discrimination. The study found low to moderate levels of discrimination reported, with discrimination levels increased significantly after transition. However, while students spoke about difficulties with friendships as discussed above, they rarely spoke about experiences of discrimination despite being asked, and as such this research deviates somewhat from previous work concerning racism and discrimination in schools with older students (see Walton, Priest, Kowal, et al., 2014; Mansouri, Jenkins, Morgan, & Taouk, 2009). One reason for this finding could be the difference in ages between this research and most previous research (which has been conducted with secondary-school aged students). However, levels of discrimination may well be low in the IELP (compared to mainstream settings), with previous research indicating that such programs typically offer inclusive environments to students (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012), and levels of perceived discrimination may increase after longer in mainstream education. As such, future research in this area would be beneficial.

Finally, students with refugee backgrounds reported lower levels of school engagement in a number of areas, as well as additional challenges in relation to wellbeing as documented in chapter six. In particular, students with refugee backgrounds spoke of worry and anxiety pertaining to any family or friends who remained in their country of origin, as well as their own experience or knowledge of violence as part of their refugee experience. Students indicated that these experiences impacted their wellbeing at school, and this supports previous research concerning the additional challenges faced by refugee young people in resettlement countries (e.g., Block, Cross, Riggs, & Gibbs, 2014; Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett 2010, Keddie, 2012). As such, additional support for this cohort of students is warranted, including additional support and training for teachers who may be working with young people experiencing psychological trauma.

In relation to teachers and educators, the findings reported in this report indicate that participants saw a number of strengths in the IELP, including a learning environment sensitive to newly arrived students' recent and immediate circumstances, smaller specialist classes allowing for explicit teaching and curriculum differentiation, and the opportunity for students to obtain an insight into mainstream educational expectations. In addition, participants identified benefits for the whole school community from having an IELC at the school, particularly in relation to the increase in cultural diversity and the extra resources that the program brought to the school. As mentioned in



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the previous chapters, these findings are consistent with whole school approaches to education, and supports previous research indicating that such approaches offer benefits to the whole school community as well as newly arrived students and their families.

However, it is worth noting that whole school approaches require that all students are able to participate fully in the school community (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012). Correspondingly, it is important that refugee and migrant students are not only seen as benefiting the whole school through the resources and diversity they bring with them, but that the whole school also provides benefits to them, including in relation to their inclusion in the school community and their ability to shape and change the school environment. As such, it is important that all staff members understand the challenges which may be experienced by newly arrived students with migrant and refugee backgrounds in the school context (Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012), and work to ensure that this cohort of students are included in all positions in the school, including student leadership positions such as school or sport captains.

## 8.2 Limitations

We learnt a lot throughout the course of this longitudinal study, and the research has some limitations. We would like to reflect on some of them here:

- While a student participant sample of 63 students provides an indication of the experiences of this cohort of children with migrant and refugee backgrounds, it places limitations on the types of analysis that can be undertaken, particularly when comparing groups. Future research with larger sample sizes in this area is important.
- The research was conducted with students who began their education at IELCs in South Australia within the inner metropolitan area, and in areas with moderate to high socio-economic status. As such, the findings may not reflect the experiences of students in IELCs situated in lower SES areas, or further from metropolitan Adelaide areas. Again, research with this cohort of students would be highly beneficial.
- Except with reference to previous research, the findings in this report are not able to be compared to students in other situations (for example, the experiences of 'mainstream' students, students who do not enter the IELP for varying reasons, or students in other States in Australia where there are different English language programs). As such, this report provides a case-study of the experiences of one group of students.
- The students in the study taught us a great deal in terms of doing research with young people. Collecting data through multiple methods has allowed us to triangulate the research findings in order to ensure reliability and validity (Due, Riggs, and Augoustinos, 2013). We have done our

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best to present the children's words, thoughts and responses in this report as they were told to us. However, context can always impact participants' responses to research, and this is particularly the case for young people. As such, we recognise that completing the research in the school environment may have impacted the types of responses the children gave to us.

## 8.3 Conclusion

To conclude, we wish to highlight that participants in this study (both children and educators) identified a broad range of benefits to the IELP model of education provision, for both the students with migrant or refugee backgrounds and the broader school community. In particular, IELCs were seen as offering safe and holistic learning environments for students. Participants were strongly supportive of this model of education provision for students, indicating that it provided support for students, educators and the whole school community. Given the increasing complexity of classrooms in countries such as Australia, ensuring that the initial educational experiences of newly arrived students are positive is critically important, and the findings of this study indicate that the IELP goes some way to offering such support for young people with refugee or migrant backgrounds in Australia.

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