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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Refugee children and families' positioning within resettlement and early childhood education policies in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a framing derived from refugee and child rights conventions to analyse the positioning of young refugee children and their families in Aotearoa New Zealand's resettlement policies, early childhood curriculum and early childhood education (ECE) funding policies. It also analyses data from interviews with participants from ECE settings who are working with refugee children and families, to discuss how policy is experienced in ECE practice, and makes recommendations about future policy directions. Main findings are that the Refugee Resettlement Strategy has critically important goals for refugee resettlement, but outcomes are narrowly defined and future-focused. While the ECE curriculum, *Te Whariki*, offers a strong basis for refugee families and children to come to belong and participate in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to have their own culture upheld, the rights of the young refugee child have no visibility within resettlement and ECE funding policies. We argue that a rights-based framework, focused on the young refugee child within their wider family, offers a productive lens through which to analyse refugee resettlement and ECE policies.

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Refugee; refugee resettlement policy; early childhood education; early childhood education policy; young children

Introduction

The world is facing a refugee crisis that has been exacerbated by Covid-19, and is predicted to get worse. In 2019, 59.5 million people were forcibly displaced, and 19.5 million of these were refugees. Around half of these refugees were under the age of 18 years (UNHCR 2020). Refugees have highly complex needs resulting from the refugee experience, which the New Zealand Ministry of Health (2001, p. 3) describes as 'the physical, psychological and social experiences of refugees as they flee conflict and persecution and seek safety'. Challenges in coming to live in a new country may include dealing with extreme trauma, severe health and mental health issues, loss of support networks and family, and living in a country with different languages, patterns of childrearing, gender roles, and social networks (Ministry of Health 2001; McMillan and Gray 2009; Mitchell and Ouko 2012; Deng and Marlowe 2013).

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This article is concerned with Aotearoa New Zealand's resettlement policies, ECE curriculum and ECE funding policies, and discusses practices that facilitate belonging and participation of refugee families and their young children in the country. The policy analysis contributes to a wider study, *Refugee families in early childhood education: Constructing pathways to belonging* (Mitchell et al. 2018). The wider study is premised on arguments that developing a sense of belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand is a primary task for refugee families, that ECE settings can play a valuable role in strengthening belonging for refugee families, and that incorporating key constructs that refugee families bring with them would cement that strength.

Early childhood settings have capacity to sustain ties with refugee families' home languages and cultures, to bring refugee families together with other families of young children, and to create understandings among all parties that are helpful for refugees in coming to belong. Such connections are explained by Putnam and Goos (2002, p. 11) as 'bridging social capital', referring to 'social networks that bring together people who are unlike one another'. In addition, ECE services have capacity to support 'social linking', which Ager and Strang (2008, p. 187) argue is necessary for refugees to gain equitable access to services. Social links 'refer to the connection between individuals and structures of the state, such as government services'.

The capacity of teachers and education practitioners to educate and care for young children, to develop meaningful relationships with their families and communities, and to support bridging and linking ties, is influenced by their working environment and the ethos and values embedded within it. Policies and systems can offer facilitating conditions or create obstacles for early childhood settings in addressing challenges faced by young refugee children and their families and in supporting bridging and linking ties. Writing of ECE systems, Urban et al. (2011, pp. 515–516) argue for 'competent systems' where relationships, communication and coordination are closely connected at all levels of ECE. 'A *competent system* includes collaborations between individuals and teams, and institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families), and *competent governance* at policy level'.

In this paper, we use a rights-based framing to analyse the positioning of young refugee children and their families in Aotearoa New Zealand's resettlement policies, early childhood curriculum and ECE funding policies. Our central interest is in the policies and practices that facilitate belonging and participation of refugee families and their young children in Aotearoa New Zealand. We then discuss findings from interviews with staff from two case study ECE organisations that have a high enrolment of children from refugee backgrounds in their ECE services, to analyse policy implementation in practice, and make recommendations on how policies might be enhanced.

Methods

This paper addresses three research questions:

- (1) How are refugee children and families positioned in resettlement and ECE policies in Aotearoa New Zealand?
- (2) In what ways are the social and cultural capital that refugee families bring with them recognised in policy?

- (3) How is the inclusion, belonging and participation of refugee children and families ensured?

Selected resettlement and ECE policies

Resettlement policies are defined as a formal text/documents conveying a country's intentions, aspirations, aims for refugee children and families which ensures their participation, protection, rights and provision in a resettlement state. We accessed and selected documents from websites of organisations working with UN Quota Refugees (UNHCR, Amnesty International), and Aotearoa New Zealand's official government website, New Zealand Immigration. For the purposes of this paper, the documents analysed are:

- *New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy* (Immigration New Zealand 2013)
- *New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy. Priorities to 2020* (Immigration New Zealand 2018), a document that outlines the identified priorities for the implementation of the 2013 *New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy* through to 2020.
- *New Zealand Refugee Quota Programme* (Immigration New Zealand 2021), a document that explains the UN quota refugee system in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand.

We analysed the following ECE policy documents:

- The national early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education 2017).
- The *ECE Funding Handbook* (Ministry of Education 2018), which sets out the government funding paid to licenced ECE services, and is relevant to consideration of resources allocated for supporting young children and their families from refugee backgrounds.

A Policy Analysis Tool was developed so we could analyse policy documents using the same criteria. The policy analysis process first included a broad screening and categorisation of select policy documents. The broad screening was followed by a targeted screening, which considered the visibility of refugee children and families and their positioning concerning their rights.

Human rights framework for categorising resettlement policy data

The article utilises a human rights-based framing to analyse the positioning of young refugee children and their families in the Aotearoa New Zealand resettlement and ECE policies. Our rights-based approach drew on the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (United Nations 1989) and the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

UNCROC is wide-ranging in its breadth and applies to children from birth to age 18 years. Children's rights under UNCROC have been categorised as falling into three main categories: provision rights, protection rights and participation rights. According to Lansdown (1994, p. 36), the provision Articles 'recognize the social rights of children to minimum standards of health, education, social security, physical care, family life, play, recreation, culture and leisure'. The protection Articles determine children's rights to be safe from any sort of abuse, discrimination, exploitation, injustice and

conflict (Lansdown 1994). Related to civil and political rights, the participation Articles recognise children's rights to 'a name and identity, to be consulted and to be taken account of, to physical integrity, to access to information, to freedom of speech and opinion, and to challenge decisions made on their behalf' (Lansdown 1994, p. 36).

Protection is a key principle of the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Principles underpinning this Convention are 'most notably non-discrimination, non-penalization and non-refoulement' (United Nations High Commission on Refugees 1951, p. 5). The Convention

lays down basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, without prejudice to States granting more favourable treatment. Such rights include access to the courts, to primary education, to work, and the provision for documentation, including a refugee travel document in passport form. (p. 5)

Drawing on the human rights-based approach, our analysis framework for categorising data focused on four themes: rights, provision, protection and participation in relation to the refugee population generally and young refugee children specifically. The theme *Rights* refers to access to civil, political, economic, social, educational, health and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by state citizens. *Provision* refers to sharing and distribution. Provision is a basic general concept, and within it, 'resource' is a key word. It refers to the right to possess, receive and have access to certain resources and services (social, education, health, housing, and employment). *Protection* refers to welfare and social protection, ensuring that basic human needs of refugee children and families are met (e.g. social security, freedom from abuse). *Participation* refers to the engagement of refugee children and families in a local community and their sense of belonging within the community. We pay attention to the need for resettlement and belonging in this country, Aotearoa New Zealand, a country that is obliged to ensure the active protection of Māori language and culture (Waitangi Tribunal 2012), and where te reo Māori is an official language.

Empirical research about ECE

The policy analysis was supplemented by data deriving from interviews carried out in two ECE organisations that cater for a large number of children and their families from refugee backgrounds. These are community-based ECE services, selected for the study because of their support for refugee children and families. They are not representative of ECE services in Aotearoa New Zealand, but rather offer exemplars of what might be possible, and insights into challenges and opportunities experienced by staff working directly with these families.

He Whānau Manaaki o Tararua is a kindergarten association in Wellington. It is a community-based not-for-profit organisation managing 101 kindergartens that cater for 5000 children and employ 900 teachers and support staff. Children from refugee families attend some kindergartens, and the association has provided additional support and resources to support refugee family needs. Interview participants were the CEO, a senior teacher and a community navigator employed to work with families from refugee and immigrant backgrounds in four kindergartens. Interviews occurred in November/December 2019 and again in July 2020, after the Covid-19 national lockdown.

The Carol White Family Centre has a largely refugee community and is located in the grounds of a secondary school, Selwyn College. Most parents attend Selwyn College's Refugee Education for Adults and Families (REAF) programme, which operates in adjacent buildings. The REAF programme offers English language, literacy and numeracy programmes, resettlement and advocacy support, and community education. The Centre and REAF programme are closely connected, with parents available for their child when needed, and coming together at morning tea time and celebratory occasions. The Centre employs bilingual support staff, who often started as parents at the Centre. Interviews with Robyn Gerrity, the director, occurred in 2018 and again in July 2020.

The interviews explored the participants' perceptions of national and local education and resettlement policies relating to refugee children and families, the implementation of the policies in their settings/organisations, examples of how the policies positively benefited refugee children and families, and any policy areas which they thought needed strengthening.

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Waikato Research Ethics Committee. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants were given copies of their transcribed interviews and opportunity to amend these. Participants gave permission for their real names to be used and for the quotations selected for this article to be used.

Positioning of young children and families in resettlement policies

Resettlement Strategy 2013

The Resettlement Strategy 2013 was designed to help refugees once they are accepted 'to live in New Zealand'. It set goals and priorities, aiming to ensure 'improved resettlement' and conveys that government agencies, non-government organisations and refugee communities would work together to put the strategies into action.

The five goals of the Strategy are:

- (1) Self-sufficiency – all working-age refugees are in paid work or are supported by a family member in paid work
- (2) Participation – refugees actively participate in New Zealand life and have a strong sense of belonging here
- (3) Health and wellbeing – refugees and their families enjoy healthy, safe and independent lives
- (4) Education – English language skills help refugees participate in education and in daily life
- (5) Housing – refugees live in safe, secure, healthy and affordable homes, without needing government housing assistance (Immigration New Zealand 2013, p. 3).

Criterion 1 Provision

Aotearoa New Zealand is one of around 37 countries participating in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2018) regular refugee resettlement programme, and resettles 1500 refugees annually through its Refugee Quota Programme (Immigration New Zealand 2021). Refugees may also immigrate to Aotearoa New Zealand under the

family reunification programme, or come as asylum seekers. UN refugees first come to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, where they live on-site for five or six weeks. The Resettlement Centre is managed by Immigration New Zealand, which works in partnership with other government agencies and non-governmental organisations to run the reception programme. The reception programme aims to prepare refugees for their lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the following key focus areas:

- *Health and mental health assessments, initial treatment and health promotion;*
- *Settlement planning, including orientation to working and living in Aotearoa New Zealand and an employment assessment for working-age refugees; and*
- *Education, including in the English language, schooling and early childhood education (Immigration New Zealand 2021, not paginated).*

Notably, the Refugee Resettlement Centre welcomes each refugee intake with a pōwhiri, the traditional Māori ceremony of welcome or ritual of encounter. Rameka et al. (2021) theorise the pōwhiri as a metaphor for refugee families and children coming to belong in Aotearoa New Zealand. They argue that:

Whilst the experiences of refugees will differ from those of Māori in scope and intensity, the need to construct positive identities of self and a sense of belonging in unfamiliar contemporary contexts is not dissimilar (p. 3) ... *Pōwhiri*, whether physical or metaphorical, is a practice of welcome that involves sharing, hospitality, generosity, relationship development, acceptance, respect and celebration. It is a means of bringing people together, a demonstration of *mana* and the *whanaungatanga* required to welcome people appropriately, with warmth and respect. It is a critical facet of welcoming refugee families and children to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre and to New Zealand. (p. 11)

The reception programme at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre is a key plank of the Resettlement Strategy 2013, and the practice of pōwhiri recognises indigenous sovereignty and responsibilities to strengthen inclusivity of new arrivals within Aotearoa New Zealand.

After finishing the reception programme, refugees are not given a choice about what city or community they will live in, but are allocated to a particular location. This may be in a location where other members of their cultural and linguistic community live, but there is no guarantee of this. As Marlowe et al. (2014) point out, resettlement in locations apart from other members of their ethnic communities ‘can create fragmented communities, limiting bonding capital resources (at least as defined by a particular ethnic grouping)’ (p. 65).

Further settlement support is provided, but only for 12 months, and includes a community orientation programme and links to services to support refugee settlement in communities (Immigration New Zealand 2021, p. 2).

Within their community, refugees are ‘provided with suitable housing [...] either Housing New Zealand or private rentals’ (Immigration New Zealand 2021, not paginated). The meaning of ‘suitable housing’ focuses on physical attributes of the housing and affordability, i.e. emphasising refugees ‘liv[ing] in safe, secure, healthy and affordable homes’. Simultaneously, the Strategy sets expectations for refugees to integrate socially and economically ‘as soon as possible so that they are living independently ... without needing government housing assistance’ (Immigration New Zealand 2013, p. 3). The

Strategy proposed that the housing subsidy for refugees would be reduced after two years and five years in Aotearoa New Zealand.

There is a sense of urgency and pressure in the overall tone of the housing strategy, with expectations for refugees to 'fit in' to Aotearoa New Zealand society in a social sense. It is assumed that refugees will gain the financial means, achieved presumably through paid employment, to have no need of housing assistance. This position ignores the reality of the lives of many refugees, and the current housing crisis, where rental costs are soaring. As Johnson wrote in a report for the Salvation Army:

Much of New Zealand's current narrative around social housing policy is based on the idea that the need for social housing is transitional – that people can be moved on from social housing as their circumstances improve. This generates the view that there is no need for increased State and other social housing because all that needs to be done is to manage the existing stock more efficiently by evicting 'undeserving' social housing tenants. But the reality for most social housing tenants is their circumstances don't improve through life, as assumed by this notion of ever-improving 'housing careers'. Some tenants will remain in need of social housing support due to such circumstances as their age, disability or health status (including mental health) – and therefore a social housing unit for such people may need to be a house for life. (Johnson 2017, p. 2)

While the 2018 priorities for implementation of the Strategy (Immigration New Zealand 2018) did not alter the housing strategy, they called for an evaluation focusing on refugee settlement outcomes at 12 months and three years, that included housing. An evaluation has potential to broaden understanding of 'outcomes' which in the Strategy are focused on integration and driven towards a goal of independence.

Criterion 2 Protection

Under the Criterion Protection, we analysed how the policies address welfare and social protection rights, aimed at ensuring that basic human needs of refugee children and families are met. Refugees who arrive in New Zealand under the Refugee Quota Programme are granted Permanent Residence status in New Zealand. After a qualifying period of five years, they may apply for citizenship status.

The right to health care was emphasised in all the analysed resettlement policy documents, with each document putting emphases on different aspects of health services. Health, mental health, initial treatment and health promotion are key areas for the reception programme at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre (Immigration New Zealand 2021). The Resettlement Strategy (2013) pinpointed health and wellbeing as a main 'outcome area', and targeted goals for age-appropriate child immunisation, increased utilisation of general practitioner services and increased access to general and mental health services. This was the only document that referred to the health needs of children. A mapping exercise undertaken through workshops in settlement locations and the National Refugee Resettlement Forum in 2017 considered refugees' access to health 'from the pre-settlement stage offshore through to arrival at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre and into their communities' (Ministry of Health & Ministry of Immigration 2017, p. 2). The findings were used to set implementation priorities for 2018–2020, in particular to strengthen the delivery and coordination of health and disability services provided for refugees. Interestingly, disability services were only an explicit focus in the mapping exercise and subsequent priorities.

Research on provision of effective primary care and development of interventions tailored to refugees' needs, highlights that infections and psychological distress are major health problems for refugees (van Loenen et al. 2017). These also affect young refugee children who may have experienced conflict, war and traumatic events. A recent United Kingdom (UK) study found that 'Young refugee children [aged 6–10 years] reported more peer problems, functional impairment, physical health, and psychosomatic problems compared to the control children and older refugee children groups' (Samara et al. 2020, p. 301). In their review of a range of further research studies, these authors highlighted impacts of the refugee experience for children that ranged from psychological disturbances, social and behavioural problems, conduct problems, and more. Our interviews, reported later in this article, offer vivid descriptions of social and behavioural problems displayed by some refugee children in their ECE settings. Yet refugee children are not specifically mentioned in the Resettlement Strategy and implementation priorities for health and rehabilitative care. An ongoing focus on rehabilitative care for refugees needs to include rehabilitative care for young children, and education and health services to support this.

The right to food and social security were not directly addressed in the analysed resettlement policies. However, the Ministry of Social Development waives the usual two-year stand-down period for quota refugees accessing the welfare system, so that they become eligible for main welfare benefits (Ministry of Social Development 2018). Nevertheless, Aotearoa New Zealand has been criticised for falling short of international human rights standards in the adequacy of benefit levels and the income disparities that exist (Human Rights Commission 2010), each of which impacts on rights to adequate food and housing. A series of publications by Child Poverty Action Group (2019) highlights food insecurity for children from low-income households as highly problematic. Our interviews with ECE participants described experiences of refugee families with young children facing periods of time without sufficient food, to the extent that the ECE service has donated food when it was desperately needed. It is hoped that, consistent with government aims, the government budget 2021 measures to raise benefit levels will help lift children out of poverty; these children will include refugee children. These findings indicate that resettlement policies need to be considered within the context of other crucial national policies that affect a wider group, but have a direct connection to the issues at hand for refugee children and families.

Criterion 3 Participation

Participation secures the right to, directly and indirectly, participate in political and public life, including the engagement of refugee children and family in a local community and their sense of belonging within the community. Our analysis addressed participatory rights and the visibility of young children within the policy documents.

Resettlement policies put emphases on participation of refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand mainly based on their *right to work*, and with an overt aim that refugees will quickly become self-sufficient. The Refugee Quota Programme publication discusses measures before and directly on arrival for 'settlement planning, including orientation to working and living in New Zealand and an employment assessment for working-age refugees' (Immigration New Zealand 2021, p. 2). The Resettlement Strategy 2013 focuses on 'self-sufficiency of all working-age refugees' and sets a plan for refugees to

be ‘in paid work or supported by a family member in paid work’ (Immigration New Zealand 2013, p. 2), which would result in ‘reduced proportions receiving unemployment-related benefits (after six months, two years, and five years)’ (Immigration New Zealand 2013, p. 7). The focus on ‘self-sufficiency’ and ‘independent living without needing government assistance’ was further reinforced in the text of the *Resettlement Strategy – Priorities to 2020*. It stated that employment is ‘critical to successful settlement’, contributes to ‘self-sufficiency and independence’ and ‘greater participation and contribution to the community’, and thus ‘support[s] all other integration and settlement outcomes’ (Immigration New Zealand 2018, p. 7). To meet the set expectations, a coordinated set of services and strategies was planned to identify the skills, work experience and qualifications refugees bring with them to New Zealand and secure refugees’ transition to meaningful and sustainable employment (Immigration New Zealand 2018).

Our claim is that a dominant economic and market discourse that has shaped policy in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1980s (Kelsey 1997) is evident in the predominant focus on paid employment and independence. While employment is crucially important for refugee settlement and belonging, broader aims are bypassed or given scant attention, such as aims for a socially just society that encompasses the social and cultural capital that refugees bring with them.

Participation of refugees in society based on the right to work was interrelated with their rights to education. The Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Centre for Refugee Education at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre provides an ECE service for children aged birth to school age, as well as primary, secondary and adult education. But, education of refugee children younger than school-age was missing from the text of the Resettlement Strategy 2013 and the implementation priorities. While education for school-aged refugees was given mention, the outcomes for refugee school leavers were decontextualised, and narrowly related only to school achievement, i.e. ‘67% of them with five years in the New Zealand education system achieving NCEA Level 2’ (Immigration New Zealand 2013, p. 7).

In addition, adult refugees’ achievement of English language, and language assistance services, such as interpreting and translation, were conveyed to be critical in ensuring people with limited or no English could access services and information that is relevant for resettlement (Immigration New Zealand 2013, p. 2018).

Putnam (2007, pp. 163–164) argues that the challenge to social capacity and solidarity brought by immigration and diversity, ‘is best met not by making “them” like “us”, but rather by creating a new, more capacious sense of “we”, a reconstruction of diversity that does not bleach out ethnic specificities, but creates overarching identities’. Belonging is about a sense of ‘shared citizenship’, and ECE is one setting where it is possible to create a world where citizenship can flourish.

ECE policies

Curriculum

The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996, 2017), is intended to be an inclusive curriculum for all children. Although refugee children and families are not specifically mentioned, inclusion encompasses broad categories of

gender and ethnicity, diversity of ability and learning needs, family structure and values, socio-economic status and religion (Ministry of Education 2017, p. 13). The *whāriki*, or woven mat, is used in this document as a metaphor for the curriculum, in which four curriculum principles (Empowerment-Whakamana, Holistic development – Kotahitanga, Family and Community – Whānau Tangata, Relationships – Ngā Hononga) are interwoven with five strands (Wellbeing – Mana Atua, Belonging – Mana Whenua, Contribution – Mana Tangata, Communication – Mana Reo, Exploration – Mana Aotūroa). Each strand of outcome is depicted as a domain of mana (power/prestige, being strong), and ‘growing potential’ is a theme for all curriculum outcomes.

In the opening pages of the curriculum document, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*¹ is acknowledged and upheld as crucial for the education system. *Te Whāriki* is a bicultural curriculum, and the welcome for immigrants (implicitly including refugees) is portrayed as coming within the context of *Te Tiriti* partnership. Tilly and Tamati Reedy, speaking about the development of *Te Whāriki*, conveyed its real strength to be its ‘capacity to establish strong and durable foundations for every culture in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and in the world’ (Reedy and Reedy 2013, p. 2). This is through a framework that emphasises children and families having agency in their own lives and cultural and contextual relevance.

A key point of difference from the Refugee Resettlement Strategy, where mention of *Te Tiriti* is absent, is that *Te Tiriti* is a central concept and value within the early childhood curriculum. Hence the strands of *Te Whāriki*, which can also be linked loosely to the goals of the Refugee Strategy, are embedded in bicultural aspirations for Aotearoa New Zealand. In this way, *Te Whāriki* offers a solid basis for refugee families and children to come to belong and participate in this country, Aotearoa New Zealand, and to have their own culture upheld.

Funding

Services catering for children from refugee backgrounds participating in ECE, require extra resources to support their provision of education. Some support needs include: language support when catering for children from non-English speaking backgrounds; rehabilitative support for children and families who have experienced trauma, through for example, easy access to specialist services, staff training and professional development; print resources in families’ home languages; and help to connect with external agencies and interpret their requirements. These can be supported through specific policy measures provided through national government and local ECE management.

The visibility of children from refugee backgrounds in funding policy and resourcing, and the amounts and way government funding are delivered are key indications of government commitment to education for children from refugee backgrounds. Alongside funding components that apply universally (the Funding Subsidy and 20 hours ECE), three funding components: Equity Funding, Targeted Funding for Disadvantage, and the Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) childcare subsidy, offer extra resources for ECE services with additional costs and for families from low-income homes. So, while there exists some commitment for additional resourcing for services with children in ‘disadvantaged’ circumstances, resource support for working with children from refugee backgrounds is not specifically identified. Some Equity Funding can be used

for language support, but decision making about usage depends on management, competes with other funding priorities and does not cater well for the needs for permanent staff members who are multilingual, and access to interpreters and translators (Mitchell et al. 2006, p. 2). The need is reflected in the priorities for implementation of the Refugee Strategy, but not well supported in ECE policies.

By contrast, the needs of refugee children are specifically identified and targeted in funding policy for the schooling sector through English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) school funding (Ministry of Education 2019), access to the Refugee Flexible Funding Pool offering additional resources to address 'broader issues that may prevent refugee background students from participating and achieving in mainstream schooling' (Ministry of Education 2020, not paginated), and through a refugee information and guidance handbook for schools (Ministry of Education 2003, Revised 2016).

In conclusion, there are no special resources for working with refugee children who do not appear as priorities in the government's ECE policies. Policies in the school sector take some account of needs of schools for additional funding and resources, reflective perhaps of a national and global emphasis by governments on the greater valuing and responsibility taken for schools and school-aged children.

Local responses, policy implementation and needs

In this section, we discuss selected data from interviews with Robyn Gerrity, Director of the Carol White Family Centre; and interviews with Amanda Coulston, Chief Executive Officer, Glenda Rowe, Senior Teacher (who offers professional advice and support for teachers), and Hanaa Baroud (Community Navigator) from He Whānau Manaaki o Tararua.

Complex needs of children from refugee backgrounds

In common, the ECE centre director, kindergarten association CEO and kindergarten senior teacher spoke of the highly complex needs of refugee children and their extended families, that resulted from the refugee experience.

More and more we're finding that the children that are coming here from places like Syria and Sudan, are – have experienced pretty extreme trauma. And so have their families. And they're coming here with no English, which is understandable. And the teachers are facing particular pressures, I suppose, or challenges around just being able to, to engage with the families, and to engage with the children. (Kindergarten association CEO)

All our families have complex, highly complex needs. And we're dealing here with whole families. Large families of children across age ranges. And also, immediate family, which range from grandparents (ECE centre director).

Protection rights

These complex needs are closely related to protection rights to a standard of living, especially the right to health and rehabilitative care. Rehabilitative care for refugee children in the form of Learning Support and rehabilitative care for parents, especially mothers with mental health issues, were conveyed to be critical needs.

Right to health and rehabilitative care

Participants recognised both the mental health issues experienced by refugee children and the competence of children.

Under the mental health umbrella as well, there are many, many issues for refugees. ... So many children are high, very high need, but that's not recognised. And their cognitive development is very advanced – because children understand and speak two or more languages. And they're learning another one. And that's not valued outside. (ECE centre director)

Behavioural issues for refugee children who have come from war-torn areas and experienced extreme trauma are prevalent. The kindergarten senior teacher, described children in a kindergarten with a very high enrolment of refugee children as hitting, biting, clawing, and showing highly competitive, emotional and sexist behaviour. The CEO further noted, 'It's like, it's not one or two children, it's like 10 of them' (Kindergarten association CEO).

The pressing need, that national policy does not adequately address, is for Ministry of Education Learning Support and resources at the time when it is needed 'not in six months' time'. Access to psychologists and therapists was described as an especially pressing need, but these professionals were said to be rarely available when needed.

But more and more we're finding that the levels of trauma experienced by our children are extremely high, and we do not have the services to support them. We're having to wait for five and six months for children to be taken up by Learning Support. Then you have the added layer of the children that are from you know, refugee families in particular. (Kindergarten association CEO)

To help with extreme behaviour, the kindergarten association sometimes put in emergency staffing, often an untrained person, for a short period of time and over limited hours, but this could not be sustained, and was inadequate to address the issues.

Similarly, the ECE director described the difficulty of getting support from special education, finding teacher aides and gaining funding for teacher aides. Needs for timely access to psychologists and other specialist staff are not being met.

Housing and social security

Despite the housing strategy in the Strategic Plan, participants described temporary situations where refugee children and families lost access to adequate housing and their benefit, and were without food. In such situations, ECE staff felt compelled to step in to help sort out the issues, because government agencies did not take responsibility for the particular problem.

The example below, described by the kindergarten senior teacher, shows a distinct need for better coordination of government agencies in supporting refugee families at the time support is needed. The child was described as having complex needs, where Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children) and Learning Support were both involved. The family had been traumatised and the mother had mental health problems. The parents had separated, and the child and father were homeless. Government agencies were not coordinated, with Learning Support advocating for the child and saying the child needed stability, and Oranga Tamariki saying housing was not their responsibility. 'Everybody was sticking to their knitting'. The father and child eventually went to live in a house with the grandparents, but the father had to sleep in the car because there was not

enough room in the house. In situations like these, the kindergarten association has often stepped in by paying for emergency housing in the first instance.

Accessing rights to housing and benefits can be difficult because information is not provided in ways that families understand. The ECE centre director described acting as a broker for a family whose benefit had been cut and who had received a letter from Housing New Zealand to say the family had to leave because they had not paid the rent. The rent had not been paid because it got paid out from the benefit.

WINZ job interview work requirements are inappropriate for some refugee adults, who were said to barely cope with basic tasks that are expected in Aotearoa New Zealand society.

And then we have their sons arriving here to say, 'Mother's crying all the time, because she doesn't know, she's never been to school, how can – she doesn't know how to do a job. And what is a job interview? She doesn't need a job. Her job is to care for the family. And she can hardly do shopping by herself'. (ECE centre director)

This participant advocated for a package for support on arrival to be available for a 'decent length of time', at least two years, and recommended that requirements should be better tailored to refugee family circumstances. This mother cared for her family, which may be the work she was expected to do in the context of her own family, rather than a paid job.

Local policy initiatives

Local policy initiatives within the two ECE settings related directly to our research question: 'In what ways are the social and cultural capital that refugee families bring with them recognised in policy?' We have explored this question in other publications and presentations (e.g. Mitchell and Bateman 2018; Mitchell 2019, 2020; Rameka et al. 2021) in relation to pedagogy within the ECE settings in the study. In this article, we discuss the development of systems and staffing initiatives that aimed to bridge understanding between refugee families, the ECE community and wider world, in reciprocal ways that invite and value contributions of refugee families.

Carol White Family Centre

Top priority is given in the Carol White Family Centre strategic plan to employing bilingual staff so there is language support for children and families, and families are able to access the curriculum.

It opens the door for communication and for wellbeing. So – and that means you can talk about your child and what your child's needs are. So, you can talk about what food they eat for example. How they sleep. And you can talk about the rules that your household has. Which is, I guess, like the culture of the home. (ECE director)

Current bilingual staff include volunteer teacher aides, the kitchen manager and cleaners who were previously involved in the Centre as parents. Some funding from the Ministry of Education Funding Subsidy is used for these positions. However, the amount of government funding is insufficient, and applications have to be made for grants, such as Lotteries grants. The process of making application is time-consuming and not always successful. The Centre has close association with the organisation Refugees as Survivors

New Zealand, and offers space for their staff to run parenting courses for refugees. Efforts are also made to find relevant professional development for staff, and according to the director, staff have developed understanding of the refugee experience and losses.

Likewise, *He Whānau Manaaki o Tararua* has consciously employed staff from refugee backgrounds, and staff who have cultural and linguistic knowledge of families, to work in their kindergartens. Hanaa Baroud, who came to Aotearoa New Zealand as a refugee from Iraq, is employed as a ‘community navigator’ for 30 hours per week to work with four kindergartens, where there are many refugee and immigrant families, mainly Muslim families. In interview, she described her role as responsive to needs and broad ranging – including providing everyday help, facilitating access to learning new skills – English language, driving lessons, support in dealing with government agencies of Work and Income New Zealand, Housing New Zealand and the social housing arm of the City Council. Hanaa attributed her ability to work responsively with refugee families, to her personal understanding of the refugee experience and first-hand knowledge of bureaucratic systems in Aotearoa New Zealand. ‘Because I am a tenant with them, so I do know all the system and the things’.

The interviews with parents, teachers and managers showed a key challenge for refugee families is understanding systems and practices. This is especially important where cultural capital of the dominant society is pervasive. In this respect, the ECE staff act as knowledge brokers, translating knowledge from one world to another. Brokered knowledge is ‘knowledge made more robust, accountable, usable; knowledge that “serves locally at a given time”; knowledge that has been de- and re-assembled’ (Meyer 2010, p. 123). In our study, the brokering involved negotiation and discussion, translating the knowledge held by staff in order to resolve and address issues that arose in helping families to engage with agencies relevant to family support, and vice versa. Their roles enabled the passing on of practical skills too.

And so – the real challenges are to have people who are able to navigate between the world of kindergarten and the world the families are in, and understanding those, those subtleties. ... Us being able to access resource[s] to be able to do that. So, people that can act as interpreters for families. (Kindergarten association CEO)

Through acting as brokers, the ECE staff enabled refugee families to establish social links (Ager and Strang 2008) with government and community services.

Conclusion

This article considers the positioning of young refugee children in resettlement and ECE policy and practice, particularly in relation to UNCROC rights to protection, provision and participation, and children’s belonging and inclusion in Aotearoa New Zealand. The framing puts refugee children’s needs and rights at the centre of solutions that will contribute to the creation of their sense of belonging and inclusion in Aotearoa New Zealand. We found that very young children were incorporated in resettlement policies only within provisions applying to their families; they had no visibility in their own right. Within that framing, the five goals of the Resettlement Strategy are very important for refugee settlement, but the outcome measures for evaluating their implementation are generally narrow and future-focused. The Strategy lacks a vision for the meaning of

‘belonging’ and ‘inclusion’ beyond ‘integration’, ‘self-sufficiency’ and ‘independence’, and seems to ignore the cultural, social and linguistic funds of knowledge that refugees bring with them, and their sense of place in home countries. The Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre introduces and promotes connectedness to Māori cultural values and practices, but the Resettlement Strategy made no mention of biculturalism or Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Consistent with the framing of our research project, we regard positive directions forward to lie in cementing a sense of bicultural belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand, and incorporating the strengths that refugees bring with them.

By contrast, the ECE curriculum, as a bicultural curriculum, based as it is in the concept of ‘mana’, and portraying a holistic view of the child and whānau, offers a basis for belonging and inclusion in Aotearoa New Zealand. ECE services in Aotearoa New Zealand can play a vital role in the resettlement of refugee families with young children, and policy initiatives could better support this role. The following are specific measures for ECE policy recommended by participants and emerging from our analysis:

- (1) Make young children in their own right visible in the resettlement policy texts, and give specific attention to the social and cultural capital that young children and their families bring with them to Aotearoa New Zealand, and their sense of place in the new and home countries.
- (2) Provide ECE services with timely access to rehabilitative services, including therapy and learning support for young children.
- (3) Strengthen social linking opportunities through the availability of people who understand the refugee experience to offer support, training and brokering with ECE staff and families. This would include key agencies having transparent systems of communication and building relationships with ECE services that are working with refugee families.
- (4) Coordinate agencies when refugees are resettled in Aotearoa New Zealand communities with good ECE services that are equipped to work with refugee children and families in that community. This would allow these services to plan for providing support through ECE. A support package for a good period of time.
- (5) Provide targeted funding for centres with a high proportion of refugee children, to enable rights of refugee children for quality culturally responsive education to be met.
- (6) Support the provision of integrated ECE services, where ECE acts as a hub for wider support for refugee children and families (as these services in our study were doing).

A rights-based framing, from the perspective of the refugee child within the context of their wider family, represents a valuable lens for developing refugee resettlement and ECE policies. The relationship between rights and responsibilities also deserves consideration. Māori academic, Wally Penetito (2009, p. 23) writes of the ‘creative tension’ between individualism and collectivism and that neither can be taken for granted: ‘Where one’s *mana ake* (unique individualism) is encouraged to develop, *rangatiratanga* (self-determination) for the collective identity is also facilitated’. They fully develop with each other in a ‘relational totality’. A focus on supporting resettlement of refugee children and families as individuals, and also on drawing on their rich social and cultural capital

and encouraging their contribution to society, would benefit Aotearoa New Zealand as a diverse and inclusive society.

Note

1. *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* is a founding document intended to be a partnership between Māori and the British Crown, ensuring tino rangatiratanga (absolute sovereign authority) for Māori over their lands, villages and all their taonga (everything that they value), and all the rights and privileges of British subjects. *Te Tiriti* was soon breached through colonisation, the New Zealand wars, land confiscations, and assimilationist policies and practices that occurred.

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