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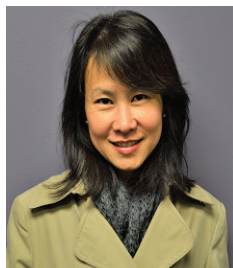


Intergenerational refugee aspirations and academic success:

from uncertain pasts to promising futures

Summary report of key research findings



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Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated to the memory of Daniel, who was the initial inspiration for undertaking this research. His parents arrived in Australia as 'boat people'. They are so very proud of the young man he became and what he accomplished in his too short life.

There are many people we need to acknowledge for their generosity and support to make the research project a success. Firstly, thanks to Rebecca Reid-Nguyen for drafting this report. Her effort and time to bring all the diverse perspectives together is greatly appreciated by the team.

Our heartfelt thanks to the 50 participants who were interviewed for this research project. We thank the participants for their generosity and openness in sharing their thoughts, opinions and experiences during the interviews. It has been an honour and a privilege to hear a small part of your story and to include your voices throughout this report.

To the parents of the children: we thank you for the care and intent with which you have raised your children, for your courage and persistence in providing them with a new home, while maintaining roots and connections to your first home, and for sharing your aspirations with your children.

To the educators of the children: we thank you for your expertise, dedication and generosity to all your students and their families, and for providing inclusion within school communities focused on care and learning.

To the young adults: we are in awe of your resilience and strength in pursuing your aspirations, and of your confidence and your capacity to contribute meaningfully to the world.

And to the children: we are proud of your achievements as you continue to build your own aspirations that are strengthened by your parents' hopes for you.

We wish you all ongoing safety, prosperity and happiness within the Australian community.

Thank you, شكرا جزيلا لك, tashakor, murakoze cyane, मुरी मुरी धन्यवाद, katta rahmat, cảm ơn rất nhiều.

With thanks to videographer, Juan Van Staden, for producing the video series 'Refugee-background young people talk about aspirations and educational success.'

To the Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation, thank you for providing the funding to allow the team to undertake this research project. Although the project was initially affected by COVID-19, we truly appreciate your continued understanding and support. Without your funding and support, we would not have been able to examine the significance of 'aspirations' in the lives of the refugee parents, young people and children we interviewed. We hope more refugee families with young children in schools will benefit from this research project.

We express our thanks to UniSA's Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion for support in disseminating the findings of the research project for greater educational and social impacts.

We recognise the traditional lands of the Kurna people, the land on which this research was undertaken. We acknowledge and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging and to the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia.

Foreword: Associate Professor Loshini Naidoo

The remarkable Mary Angelou once said “the children to whom we read simple stories may or may not show gratitude, but each boon we give strengthens the pillars of the world”. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, I came to understand the intricacies of privilege and power through stories of longing and belonging in a country delineated by race. This proved to be fertile ground later, when as an educator, I chose to enact, nurture and sustain a social justice pedagogy in my teaching and research. The main thrust of my work lies in supporting schools and universities to build and foster educational achievement for students of refugee background.

The challenges that refugee students experience with regard to accessing, transitioning into, and successfully participating in education have been subject to increased scholarly attention. However, little is known about the impact of the parents’ aspirations on the educational achievement of refugee background students in Australia. This is an extraordinary omission given the increasing focus on parent engagement in Australian education. By including the voices of parents and students of refugee background, the report: *Intergenerational Refugee Aspirations and Academic Success: From Uncertain Pasts to Promising Futures*, gives us a powerful insight into the unique and diverse life experiences of refugee families. Giving voice, being heard and offering validation, apart from being central aspects of social justice, are also revelatory.

I applaud the research team for affirming and sharing the aspirations of the parents of refugee young people because it highlights the important role that refugee parents and communities play in the processes of education. It is the connection between students, parents, and places of education that help refugee background students transition and this association presents both opportunities and challenges. The research report highlights the value of intercultural understanding in cross-cultural relations and the impact of such sensitivity on refugee students’ ongoing engagement in education. By foregrounding parents, students and communities as knowledge producers and agents in their own learning, the findings of the report are nuanced by complex understandings of cultural, social and linguistic diversity. *Intergenerational Refugee Aspirations and Academic Success: From Uncertain Pasts to Promising Futures* offers a convincing alternative narrative about refugees that counter the prevailing discourse that forced migrants are a threat to economic stability and social cohesion.

Associate Professor Loshini Naidoo

School of Education, Western Sydney University, July 2021



Commendation: His Excellency the Honourable Hieu Van Le AC and Mrs Lan Le

As children, we were both brought up in families which highly valued education. School was a sanctuary for us during the chaos of the war, even though tragically we lost many classmates and friends over the years.

In 1977, we arrived in Australia as boat people, with little more than the clothes on our backs. We knew that education would enable us to open up to many opportunities to build satisfying careers and fulfilling lives, so we both pursued further study.

A decade later, we had our two sons, Kim and Don. By this point we not only understood the importance of education for a successful life, but we had navigated the Australian education system ourselves. This knowledge and experience helped us immensely as we set about choosing pre-schools and schools for the boys, and supporting them on their own education journey.

Many parents of refugee backgrounds in Australia may not have had the same experiences as us. This creates a challenging situation for parents who want passionately to provide their children with the best education opportunities possible, but are not sure how to do this.

While research into educational outcomes for refugee youth exists, to date it has focused on teaching methods, English language proficiency and curricula. We are very pleased that this report breaks new ground into the role refugee parents play in supporting the academic success of their children.

We would like to acknowledge the University of South Australia for conducting this important research, and the Channel 7 Children’s Research Foundation for its valuable support. We have no doubt its contents will provide excellent guidance for community leaders, policy makers, principals and teachers as they pursue educational excellence with students of refugee backgrounds.

His Excellency the Honourable Hieu Van Le AC and Mrs Lan Le

July 2021



About the research project

The research project was funded by the Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation and conducted during 2019–2021. It is a qualitative study which investigates the impact of parental aspirations on their children's academic success.

This research offers authentic insights into the intergenerational aspirations of refugee-background families. It highlights the important role of parents in articulating aspirations, valuing education as the pathway to future opportunities and fostering the educational success of their children. The parents in this research project contributed significantly to their children's subsequent development as accomplished, confident and respectful young adults.

Facing uncertainty and with much courage, refugee parents in this research have sought peace and safety through resettlement in Australia. Hopes for a better life for their family are translated into valuing education for their children as the foundation for future possibilities. The importance they place on their children's education is very much in alignment with the intent expressed in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration:

Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society, and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing ... [It] encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face. (COAG Education Council 2019, p. 2)

50 participants were interviewed: educators, refugee parents, and their children ranging in age from primary school-aged children to young adults. The participants' countries of origin include Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burundi, Nepal, Rwanda, Sudan, Syria, Uzbekistan and Vietnam, with Nepali, Hazara and Algerian ethnicities.

This summary report presents the research findings, participants voices and key messages through a series of interdependent themes. Central to the findings is the use of parent and child voices in the form of quotations, as this provides authentic insights into the identified themes. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

The research has the potential to build a greater understanding between parents, children and education institutions about the contribution that parents make to the academic success of their children, and hence future opportunities. Moreover, the findings can inform best-practice approaches to improve educational outcomes for refugee-background young people.

A copy of the full report is available at bit.ly/UniSARefugeeAspirationsandAcademicSuccess

Video resource

A video series, '*Refugee-background young people talk about aspirations and educational success*' has been developed as a resource to facilitate reflection and discussion with educators, pre-service teachers, students and parents. The series includes:

- the main resource, a 9 minute compilation of five refugee-background young adults,
- a 3 minute video of one tertiary student of Hazara-Australian ethnicity,
- 5 extended videos; one of each of the participants.

The videos can be accessed via the following YouTube link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bZR7UDWV8&list=PLuKEOROYHJPncPSghu4irOR3xOr-JorEJ&index=1>

Questions to facilitate discussion and reflection are available on the UniSA webpage: bit.ly/UniSARefugeeAspirationsandAcademicSuccess

Child–parent relationships: caring and respectful communication

Research findings

Our research found that the strength of the child–parent relationship was crucial in understanding intergenerational aspirations and in contributing to young people doing well academically. Insights included:

- Parents were actively present in their children's lives with respectful, caring, reciprocal relationships. At the core of the relationships were communication and navigating difficult conversations.
- A close and connected family unit, enabling collective rather than individual support, was central to educational success.

The close bonds between parents and children were a consistent theme throughout this research, and they were described as caring, loving and friendly. The child–parent relationship was balanced with respect, shared connection and emotional security, with family conversations forming the basis of listening to each other and regular checking in.

The strength of the family unity was a common theme raised in participant interviews. Participants believed that parents heading strong, connected families enabled collective family support, rather than a focus on the independent, individual child.

Participants said

We have very strong bond, very strong relationships – we are a strong family. (Abbas and Ameena, Syrian-born parents)

So, with us ... making every decision as an entity, like family, it's pretty good. First family and then the individual. So that's why I think we're very close. But just because we want to do this, doesn't mean for someone to say no ... we discuss it and then make the right decision, because they [parents] will probably know more than me. Maybe I know something they don't know, so it's just out there and someone can comment on it and give advice. It's not like I'll do something and you guys [parents] decide do or not. You can put your opinion in. (Setara, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity, Bachelor of Law and International Studies student)

So, my parents ... I guess they grew while we were growing as well in their mindset and now the way I see their aspirations is truly that it's just to be the best possible that we can be and that's made the relationship between my dad so much better as well ... compared to when we were very, very young. (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)

Key messages

When parents share in a considered way the reasons why they undertook their refugee journey, **children are more likely to become young adults** who draw from these stories purpose and motivation for their education and future, and retain strong connections with, and respect for, their parents.



Towards a better life: from uncertainty to safety

Research findings

The research revealed children's clear understanding of the purpose for their refugee parents' journey to Australia, with strong connections between:

- the parents' careful and considered sharing of their refugee journey story with their children and
- the children's understanding of why their parents sought safety in a new country and what their parents had endured in order to provide them with a safe and better life, as an important prerequisite to accessing education.

The refugee parents we interviewed were adamant about the importance of living in a peaceful country. Safety for their family was integral to building their family's capacity to move forward and to enable their children to consistently participate in education.

Parents shared the experience of their refugee journey with their children in carefully considered ways, sparing their children overwhelming fear and sadness by not sharing the more traumatic details of their experience. The refugee story was important in helping their children understand why the family had moved to Australia, and that living in a safe country was a prerequisite for their future 'better life'. The young people interviewed had an understanding of their parents' refugee journey and this has been woven into the fabric of their relationship with their parents, their cultural identity and their sense of purpose in relation to their family's future.

Participants said

[My parents] were in Burundi but there was a war. They were very young so they had to ... flee into Tanzania ... and that's where they met each other ... I think my mum was ... probably ... eight ... and my dad is a bit older ... probably around 12 maybe when they fled ... My mum, she fled with her whole family but her and her mum were separated and her dad ... died during that process. When she arrived in the camp that's when she was ... reunited with her mum. My dad, he fled with ... his younger siblings because his parents didn't, they chose not to flee from war, they chose to stay ... My parents got married when they were 20 ... and they had me and my brother, [they were] probably 15 years in the camp ... we came to Australia in 2005. I was four and I was turning 5 the next month ... I feel like my memory starts, like, when I got to Australia. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents)

It's the opposite of our country. We can find justice here, but you couldn't find it in our country ... it's very safe here. There is no safety back in our country, and [now] we have the opportunity to send our children to learn. (Abbas and Ameena, Syrian-born parents)

Coming here from Afghanistan, I didn't even need to be told what my parents sacrificed ... it was always known ... growing up I knew the story ... they have given up so much for us, they've fled war, they've left their family loved ones, just for us. Just so we can have a better life. So, we have to do well. That's like our life purpose. (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)

Key messages

When parents share in a considered way the reasons why they undertook their refugee journey, **children are more likely to become young adults** who draw from these stories purpose and motivation for their education and future, and retain strong connections with, and respect for, their parents.



New beginnings: foundations for the family's future

Research findings

Our research found that, despite variation in the length of time and experiences of resettlement, the families were consistent in concurrently focusing their efforts on:

- ensuring their family was strongly committed to their collective, rather than individual, new beginning
- providing economically to enable their children to focus on their education, hopefully leading to better job opportunities in the future.

The parents we interviewed prioritised establishing the family unit. Permanently leaving extended family in their place of origin was a cause of ongoing worry and sadness for many. Regardless, all refugee-background parents were persistent in establishing a strong immediate family unit in Australia.

They were able to position their refugee journey as a past experience, which then formed the foundation for their purpose in resettling in Australia. As the heads of the family unit, parents acknowledged the refugee journey as a time of great hardship and uncertainty, while speaking positively about the present. Being very much present and active in their children's lives provided their children with emotional security and an optimistic future-focused mindset. As such, the parents were pivotal in supporting their children's participation in education.

Participants said

My dad says ... I'll earn money but you guys have to study so you guys can ... be something in your life other than being like us, going to the farm and working. Because my dad now has ... some issues with his hands, they don't work properly. (Salima, age 12, Pakistan-born to Afghanistan-born parents of Hazara ethnicity)

He has been working very hard to provide them economic support ... So, his main purpose is to support them economically and whatever they need, he can, he could provide them for their education. So that they should benefit from this opportunity [he tells his children] I give them the reasons that if you don't have, if you will not get education, you will be like me working 12 to 14 hours a day. (Interpreter for Ahmad, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)

And my mum, she's always ... sitting down with us every chance that we get, telling us ... about her past and ... how hard it was for her ... she just really encourages us to do ... good and just chase the opportunity that we have. So, she's really good ... in the camp it was really hard to find jobs or do something with your life and they say how they managed to do that through ... working hard and stuff. And they talk about the things they want to see us achieve as well. (Ester, aged 18, Tanzanian-born to Burundian parents)

Key messages

When parents work towards providing a secure foundation for their family and the children's education, **children are more likely to become young adults** who develop respect and gratitude for their parents' support, and in turn are motivated to work hard in their studies for a better future.



Cultural identity: from family to the wider community

Research findings

Our research findings revealed the fluid nature of cultural identity for our young participants as their global sense of self and belonging strengthened over time.

- Parents were influential in facilitating strong connections with the home culture, and maintenance of home languages was significant for children's and young adults' cultural identity and belonging.
- Children expanded their early home cultural identity to embrace a more cosmopolitan sense of identity and belonging within the wider community as young adults.

Interviews with both parents and children highlighted the concurrent importance of home culture and making connections within the wider Australian community. Parent participants shared their experience of navigating resettlement and the adaptability and resilience required of them. Evident was the importance of cultural identity within their family in maintaining a sense of familiarity and belonging.

The young people interviewed were confident and gracious people, proud of their cultural heritage. Rather than operating in bicultural ways with one set of values and behaviours at home, and another in the wider community, these young people embraced a more cosmopolitan identity in which they were able to relate inclusively with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Participants said

Because Hazaras they're in minority in Afghanistan ... they had a very hard life before, never had opportunities. But now a little bit circumstances has changed, they have a little bit more opportunity, that's why the Hazaras they're more keen to have a better life, they're working hard to have better life ... and they are very successful now ... [In Australia] we are proud of being Hazara. (Ahmad, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)

I guess the cultural sense where ... there are different cultural norms ... and how you speak to adults, how you treat your fellow friends and family, respect elders ... very strict, very family oriented, very communal ... (Samuel, aged in his 20s, Rwandan-born, Bachelor of Construction Management)

I'm very happy that I can speak and read and write the language because a lot of my peers from the same background don't. So, I feel like I have, like an extra ... I guess how to understand the world, a different perspective, because obviously there's cultural differences. (Thuy, aged in her 20s, Australian-born to Vietnamese parents, graduated with Bachelor of Creative Arts, working in the field)

Key messages

When parents facilitate a strong home culture, including maintenance of their home language, and encourage their children to relate within the wider community, **children are more likely to become young adults** who respect the home culture and language, relate well with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and are confident, culturally proud and accomplished young people.



Valuing education: aspirations for future opportunities

Research findings

In looking specifically at the connection between the valuing of education, parental aspirations and children's academic achievement, our research findings revealed:

- The parents discussed as a family the value of education and dispositions for learning as pathways to future employment opportunities.
- Parents and children navigated and negotiated aspirations in a nuanced way, which evolved over time from parent-led aspirations to children following their own aspirations.

Education was articulated and prioritised by parents as the pathway to better future employment opportunities. Parents provided ongoing encouragement for children's academic studies, actively modelling and facilitating the development of dispositions for learning, such as working hard and with effort, persistence, being focused, as well as being proactive in seeking supportive mentors, and striving to do one's best for academic success.

Over time, as young people became highly self-motivated learners with increasing independence and agency, there was a shift from parent-led aspirations to children prioritising their own aspirations. Caring relationships enabled different perspectives to be voiced and difficult conversations to be had. As young adults confidently pursuing their own aspirations, they did this with a strong connection between pursuing a career they were interested in and wanting to make their parents proud. Strong parental support remained throughout with parents ultimately wanting their children to be successful and happy. The significance of their children being the first in the family to attain tertiary education was clearly a source of parental pride.

Participants said

A strong message from my family that I have to study; without education, there's nothing. That's the message ... but they also have this trust [that] I can do it. It's really positive and very exciting to be ... at the university as a refugee with uneducated parents. (Shilpa, aged in her 20s, Nepalese-born to Bhutanese parents of Nepalese ethnicity)

The main inspiration for [the parent] is that no one in his family had an opportunity to have a higher education. So his children will be the first one in his family that ... will be educated enough ... with a higher qualification. No one in his family was a doctor or an engineer, there's the aspiration that he wants from his children to be educated so that he could feel proud. (Interpreter for Ahmad, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)

I try and take their aspirations; I value their aspirations a lot ... I know that we live in a society where it's like you have to live for yourself; you can't live for other people ... I'm not going to live for my parents but I really, really value what they want out of life and I want to somehow take that and take what I want and work around it ... [my dad] wants me to do something that's best for me ... and he also believes that I'm at an age where I can make those decisions ... when we were young, he was always ... [become] a doctor and then in Year 12 ... I told him ... I don't want to be a doctor ... and he was like, okay, that's not what you want to do ... he could see that I was going to pursue something because I truly was dedicated to it ... he can just respect that I have a life of my own, I have aspirations of my own ... where I take their aspirations into consideration, I just know that they don't want me to take things for granted, so I won't. (Farzana, aged in her 20s, Afghanistan-born of Hazara ethnicity)

Key messages

When parents promote positive dispositions for learning, share their aspirations and also listen to their children's aspirations, **children are more likely to become young adults** who confidently pursue their own aspirations for their future while valuing their parents' earlier aspirations, and are intrinsically self-motivated with a strong belief in their own abilities and efforts.



Parent–school relationships: building partnerships

Research findings

This aspect of the research considers education across the primary and secondary sectors. The research findings highlight positive aspects as well as areas that would benefit from more comprehensive research.

- Parents and children had close relationships with primary schools. This included a high level of trust of key staff members and recognition of the importance of bilingual staff for effective communication.
- Children had close relationships with key staff in secondary schooling; however, for parents communication was more limited with a reliance on children as the conduit.
- Parents undervalued the positive impact of their home support for their children's education and did not recognise the value and importance of their role in partnership with the school.

Parents provided very effective support for their children's education through articulating their aspirations, encouraging their children's positive learning dispositions, providing for the family economically, practical support, and establishing connected family units with a strong cultural identity and sense of belonging. However, while parents could see the importance of their input in advising and encouraging their children, they acknowledged their limitations in academic support for their children's education. They attributed this to their lack of English language, lack of understanding of the content that children

were learning at school and the ways teachers in Australia teach. Lack of English language impacted parents' ability to support their children's education directly (e.g. listening to children practise their reading, clarifying homework tasks). They did not generally see their contributions as valuable or as 'partnership' with the schools.

Participants said

They can't help them with their learning, but the only thing that they provide is to care about them. They advise them about their education, how you can be successful through education. (Interpreter for Benham, aged in his 40s, Afghanistan-born parent of Hazara ethnicity)

We will support them [children] in every aspect, actually for fulfil their dreams and it's up to them what they want to do ... in future, but we hope they can achieve the higher degrees and live good lives. We cannot do much actually in this regard because our English is not that good, so they have to depend on themselves most of the time. (Abbas and Ameena, aged in their 40s, Syrian-born parents)

Having someone from our community working in the school has helped a lot. In general, we have questions. We want to ask something about our children. And if we have someone from the community [who] works in the school, we feel comfortable to ask questions. (Hamesh, aged in his 40s, Bhutanese-born parent speaking about bilingual support at school)

Key messages

When parents understand their role in partnership with schools, provide a supportive home environment that complements the school learning environment, and engage personally with their children's school, **children are then more likely to become adults** who stay engaged in education, value their parents' contribution and connect with educators and mentors along the way.



Recommendations for further research

Based on the research undertaken in the project, we have identified five areas for further research:

1. Improving refugees' understanding of our education systems to support informed decision-making

The complex nature of our education systems is challenging for refugee parents to understand, particularly with all they are contending with during resettlement. We suggest further research in relation to supporting parental understanding of our education systems, to enhance their ability to make more broadly informed decisions in relation to their children's educational options. Of note, the children's parents often also had little understanding or concept of our tertiary education system beyond the ATAR score required for program entry. More work needs to be done to inform parents about various career pathways and educational trajectories even beyond high school education.

2. Improving parental understanding of their 'partnership' role with schools and its impact on their child's education

Refugee parents valued education as the pathway to future opportunities. However, parents of children who were achieving well academically did not comprehensively value their own role in supporting their children's education. They understood the value of their encouragement; however, they did not readily recognise the value of how they supported their child. They tended to focus on negatives or what they were not able to contribute due to lack of English and lack of familiarity with the education systems and content. Parents had limited understanding of their role in partnership with schools and the value they bring to this. We suggest further research to support more refugee parents to realise that they too have the capacity to support their child's education. This would be useful in relation to increasing parental and school understanding of the value of what parents bring to the partnership to support their children's education.

3. Supporting the transition to university

While universities have many resources available to support students, university studies are increasingly online and the relationships with support systems are often transactional. We hence suggest further research into strategies and resources that support refugee-background students in their transition to tertiary education and finding a peer group and building their sense of belonging. While universities have many resources available to support students, university studies are increasingly online and the relationships with support systems are often transactional. We suggest further research into strategies and resources that support refugee-background students in their transition to tertiary education.

4. Mental health discussions

The young adult participants communicated that they are confident, capable and well-grounded. However, several shared their experiences of family members who suffered from mental health issues impacted by their refugee journey and life experiences and personal experiences of considerable

stress during adolescence, which impacted levels of anxiety. We suggest that further research is needed into effective ways to increase parental understanding of mental health issues and cross-generational discussions on mental health between refugee parents and their children.

5. The impact of parental refugee stories on their children

The young people valued and respected their parents' refugee journey and the positive impact this had on providing purpose and motivation to do well in their studies and for their future employment. While this has been an important finding in this report, there is clearly a need to investigate this in a more in-depth way and with a larger group of participants focusing on the intergenerational complexities of how the transmission of parental refugee experiences occurs or does not occur and the various ways this has impacted their children and their life trajectories from education to employment. This will be of benefit to refugee-background families and communities as well as for educational institutions that seek to support these families.

References

Council of Australian Governments, Education Council 2019, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, COAG Education Council, Canberra.

Image sources

Cover page: Courtesy of Freshta Rahimi
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