

## **Supporting successful learning for refugee students: The Classroom Connect project**

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Young people from refugee backgrounds face significant academic and social challenges in mainstream secondary education in Australia. Research suggests that mentoring initiatives and tutoring can help students remain engaged in education and achieve positive educational, social and emotional outcomes. The Classroom Connect Project is a joint venture between Mercy Works, the Catholic Education Office Sydney and the Sydney and South Western Sydney Regions of the NSW Department of Education and Training. Classroom Connect provides adult volunteer tutors for students from refugee backgrounds in secondary schools in Sydney's west and inner-west. This paper discusses the findings of research from 2008-2010 which evaluated benefits of Classroom Connect for stakeholders – students, teaching staff in schools and volunteer tutors. Findings indicate that Classroom Connect supports students in understanding difficult subjects and completing assessment tasks and homework. Students have also experienced growth in confidence and self-esteem through mentoring relationships that have developed with their tutors. From the views expressed by the participants in the research evaluations, Classroom Connect may be a viable model for supporting successful learning for refugee students as they transition from Intensive English Centres and make their way through the grades in mainstream secondary schools.

### **Introduction**

This paper discusses the Classroom Connect Project which provides volunteer adult tutors for students from refugee backgrounds in secondary schools in Sydney. Classroom Connect is a partnership between Mercy Works, the Catholic Education Office Sydney (CEO) and the Sydney and South Western Sydney Regions of the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET).

Classroom Connect was developed in 2008, in response to the significant needs of young people from Sudanese refugee backgrounds who were transitioning from Intensive English Centres (IECs) to mainstream classes in Catholic secondary schools in Sydney's west and inner-west. Since then, refugee students from other cultural backgrounds, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Burma have also been supported by Classroom Connect tutors. By 2010, there were 31 tutors operating in 9 secondary schools assisting approximately 182 students.

This paper argues that Classroom Connect provides important social, emotional and academic support for refugee students as they make their way through the secondary

schooling system. Mentoring relationships between tutors and students are fostering the development of academic and social skills necessary for students from refugee backgrounds to meet the challenges of mainstream schooling in Australia.

There are substantial numbers of young people from refugee backgrounds currently navigating schooling in Australia. From January 2004 to December 2010, around 43% of all Humanitarian arrivals in Australia were aged under 18 years (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011). The largest intake was from Sudan, followed by Iraq, Burma and Afghanistan. While these young people have enormous resilience and life experience, most face significant obstacles in making the transition to life and education in Australia (Olliff, 2010).

Young people with backgrounds of interrupted schooling and low literacy in a first language have complex learning needs. Many refugee young people have experiences of disrupted or non-existent schooling. As a result, they have missed out on important learning milestones in literacy and numeracy and they may not have been inducted into sophisticated subject-specific contexts of curriculum subjects, particularly in secondary schooling. As a result, students may struggle with basic literacy as well as the many demands of the crowded curriculum in mainstream schooling (Cassity & Gow, 2006b; Chegwiddden & Thompson, 2008; Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Refugee Education Partnership Project, 2007). These issues may be compounded if the student is from an oral-based culture or if they have not attained literacy in a first, or any language. It can take up to 10 years for students from these backgrounds to catch up with their native speaking peers (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006; Collier, 1995; Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Another important aspect of education is the western cultural environment of schooling. Students from refugee backgrounds may lack an understanding of school expectations and norms (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006; Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). In addition, physical and psychological effects of past torture and trauma may also affect a young person's ability to learn, causing a lack of concentration, slow academic progress or challenging classroom behaviour (Olliff, 2010; Refugee Education Partnership Project, 2007).

Transition from the supportive and smaller environment of Intensive English Centres to mainstream education can be particularly difficult for many young people from refugee backgrounds (Cassity & Gow, 2006a; Cranitch 2008). The support students have received in an IEC is usually not sufficient for smooth transition into mainstream schooling. Most new arrivals to Australia spend around a year in an IEC but for refugee students, this is not enough time to address language and literacy gaps and build the myriad skills they need to negotiate mainstream schooling (Chegwiddden & Thompson, 2008; Cranitch, 2008).

Young people from refugee backgrounds face significant challenges in secondary education environments. Most secondary schools, in particular, are busy places with each student having multiple teachers for different subjects and moving from room to room in a day. Students do receive targeted ESL support within schools, however, schools and teachers may not have specialist knowledge of the learning needs of students from backgrounds of disrupted schooling. Research has acknowledged that

even if knowledge exists, “there is a lack of resources to meet the complex pastoral and psychosocial support needs of students from refugee backgrounds in some education environments” (Olliff, 2010, p.5).

Education has a complex and vital role for young people from refugee backgrounds. The challenges of disrupted schooling, past experience of torture and trauma, forced migration and settlement issues all come to a head in a mainstream school. Students may be faced with issues of social isolation, bullying, stress and academic failure – all of which have significant psychological and emotional repercussions that impact on the student’s capacity to learn (Brown et al., 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2006a; Cranitch, 2008; Olliff & Couch, 2005). Therefore, the importance of relationships and support systems at school cannot be underestimated (Chegwidden & Thompson 2008). Classroom Connect is not only a tutoring project – it has the potential to be a support system to help students cope emotionally and socially in the environment of the mainstream secondary school.

Despite the many challenges facing students from refugee backgrounds, these young people often display remarkable resilience and capacity to learn. Refugee students are often successful learners who make great strides in their personal and academic growth. It is important to recognise and value the life skills, cultural understandings and potential benefits to Australia offered by young people from refugee backgrounds (Cranitch, 2008; Olliff, 2010). Many of these young people are highly motivated and see education as “the most important aspect of their life as it is a source of hope and future” (Chegwidden & Thompson, 2008, p. 24). Programs like Classroom Connect can help support the aspirations of young people from refugee backgrounds and assist them in gaining the maximum benefit from their educational experiences.

There is a growing body of research that advocates after-school and homework tutoring as well as mentoring to help students from refugee backgrounds to catch up and remain engaged in mainstream schooling (Brown et al., 2006; Cassity & Gow, 2006b; Chegwidden & Thompson, 2008; Ferfolja, McCarthy, Naidoo, Vickers & Hawker, 2009; Luizzi & Saker, 2008; O’Sullivan & Olliff, 2006). The project under discussion in this paper, Classroom Connect, is one model that involves key stakeholders in providing ongoing and meaningful support for refugee students in mainstream secondary schools.

Mentoring has been identified as a fruitful strategy for supporting the academic and social needs of young people from refugee backgrounds, particularly those from Africa. The Victorian government’s strategic plan defines mentoring as “the formation of a helping relationship between a younger person and an unrelated, relatively older, more experienced person who can increase the capacity of the young person to connect with positive social and economic networks to improve their life chances” (Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development, 2005, p. 6). Mentoring of young people from refugee backgrounds has been found to have benefits including increasing confidence, improving career opportunities, reducing risk-taking behaviour and alleviating isolation. It has proven to be particularly useful after immediate settlement needs of young people are met (Sawrikar, Griffiths & Muir, 2008). As will

be discussed later in this paper, the Classroom Connect Project enables young people to develop mentoring relationships with their tutors.

Homework clubs have also been advocated to provide targeted support for student learning and help with assignments and homework. Learning Beyond the Bell is a system of Victorian homework clubs funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. These Out of School Hours Learning Support programs are provided by schools and community groups around Victoria in order to increase the connectedness of refugee and migrant young people to school and to the community (Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2008).

Another intervention project is currently operating in western Sydney to help support the academic needs of refugee students. The Refugee Action Support Program (RAS) is conducted by the University of Western Sydney, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF) and the NSW Department of Education and Training. Pre-service teachers from the University of Western Sydney, Charles Sturt University and the University of Sydney participate in tutoring of refugee students in schools in greater South Western Sydney and the NSW Riverina region. Each school negotiates the way in which the tutor works with the students, such as in-class support, supporting small groups or one-on-one with a student, creating teaching resources or observing lessons. Depending on the school, tutoring occurs during the school day and/or after school. Evaluations of the RAS project are positive, with teachers and school co-ordinators reporting improved learning outcomes for refugee students and educational benefits for student teachers (Ferfolja et al., 2009; Naidoo, 2010).

### **Classroom Connect**

In the Classroom Connect Project, adult volunteer tutors provide support for refugee students in the school setting for one day per week, working one-on-one with students or with a small group of students. In 2008, the pilot year for the project, 10 volunteers supported approximately 25 students in the Catholic Intensive English Centre, Lewisham (CIEC) and two Catholic secondary schools. The project was expanded in 2009, with 31 volunteer tutors supporting over 100 students across the CIEC and six Catholic secondary schools. In 2010, 31 Classroom Connect tutors provided support for 182 students across the CIEC, five Catholic secondary schools and three Department of Education secondary schools. In the early days of the project, Sudanese students were targeted for support. However, after the pilot year, the project was expanded to support any students from refugee backgrounds who were identified by the school as needing additional support. Tutors involved in Classroom Connect participate in an induction program run by the Mercy Works Classroom Connect Project co-ordinators. Induction involves general information about refugees and their settlement needs, key issues in mentoring as well as training in ESL, literacy and secondary school assessment strategies.

One main difference between the RAS project and Classroom Connect is the experience of the tutors. RAS tutors are pre-service teachers whereas Classroom Connect tutors are predominantly experienced teachers, often retired. Classroom

Connect tutors work with students for an entire school year, and some even support the same students from year to year, whereas RAS tutors support students for one semester only. The length of time with students gives Classroom Connect tutors the opportunity to develop valuable mentoring relationships, which have proven to provide significant benefits for young people from refugee backgrounds. This article reports on the findings of three Classroom Connect Project evaluations from 2008-2010.

## **Research methodology**

In 2008 and 2009, qualitative research evaluations were undertaken to identify whether the Classroom Connect Project was meeting the needs of its key stakeholders – schools, volunteer tutors and students. In 2010, a smaller mixed-methods survey supplemented evaluations from the previous two years. The results from all three evaluations will be summarised in the Findings below.

Research endeavoured to capture the range of responses from key stakeholders in the Classroom Connect Project. Research was structured around three main questions:

1. What is currently happening in the Classroom Connect Project?
2. What are the perceived outcomes for students, teachers, schools and volunteer tutors?
3. What areas of improvement can be identified?

In order to address these questions, a methodology involving complementary quantitative and qualitative measures would have been appropriate to provide specific data on academic outcomes for students. Unfortunately, quantitative methods such as a pre and post testing of literacy and numeracy for students and comparison of student report grades were not available due to the small scale of the research project and the difficulties of acquiring ethical consent from schools, parents and students. However, given that the co-ordinating teachers at each school know their students well and had been working with them extensively at the time of the research, interviews with teachers provided valuable, general information about student academic progress. The tutors, most of whom are experienced teachers, were also able to make professional judgements about the students' academic capabilities and progress.

### **2008 and 2009 evaluations**

Interviews were held with all volunteer tutors involved in the project, as well as school co-ordinators of Classroom Connect in participating schools. Groups of students from three schools were interviewed in 2008 and/or 2009 in the presence of a staff member from the school. Interviews with school co-ordinators, principals and volunteer tutors were conducted individually or in small groups. In 2008, 6 school representatives (project co-ordinators and principals), 9 volunteer tutors and 11 students were interviewed. In 2009, 6 school representatives, 18 volunteer tutors and 12 students were interviewed.

A semi-structured interview approach was adopted, enabling the researcher to be selective in the collection of data and for question sequencing to flow along with the

discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The interview schedule was developed around a list of broad ranging questions related to the three research questions (see Appendix 1). Basic discussion topics were established by the interviewer, but the respondents had freedom in the discussion. Interviews took between 30-40 minutes.

The research project was approved by the Catholic Education Office. Informed consent was obtained from school principals, co-ordinating teachers, and tutors. Extensive consultation was undertaken with each school to ensure that information about the research was conveyed clearly to parents and students. Student and parent consent letters were developed in consultation with schools and teacher's aides. The privacy of all participants was protected and names of students, teachers and schools omitted.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research is an "ongoing process" (Mertens, 1998, p. 351) and so analysis was integrated into the collection process. This allowed for flexibility as data collected in the interviews formed the basis of further questions and discussion points in subsequent interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Interviews with tutors and school co-ordinators were audio recorded and transcribed, with written consent from the participants. Some student interviews were not recorded if students indicated discomfort with the use of an audio recorder. Detailed notes were made by the researcher during all interviews. Data analysis was based on principles outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display and examination, conclusion and interpretation. Coding involved "placing the qualitative data into meaningful categories" (Omidian, 2000, p. 58). The three broad research questions were used initially as guidance to categorise the data. Transcripts, interview notes and field notes were collated and sorted according to the main research questions. Descriptive themes were identified in the data and analysed according to categories of participants across all schools – students, tutors or co-ordinating teachers. Data were also sorted from each individual research site (students, tutors and co-ordinating teachers from each school). This enabled comparison of emerging themes across and within sites and participant groups.

Triangulation of data was used to cross-check and confirm findings. This is an important principle of qualitative research design as triangulation seeks "multiple sources of support for any interpretation" (Ager, 2000, p. 32). Data regarding project outcomes were compared between student, tutor and co-ordinator interviews. At schools where student interviews were not undertaken, comparison and cross-checking was only possible between tutor and co-ordinating teacher data. Following the research, findings and interpretations were discussed with co-ordinating teachers and with tutors for verification and to ensure that their points of view had been accurately reflected.

### **The 2010 evaluation**

A one-page survey was conducted with teachers and volunteers participating in the Classroom Connect Project in 2010. There were four survey questions. For Question One, participants were asked to rate a statement by placing a tick on one of 5 points on a Likert scale. Questions 2 to 4 were open ended, with participants being asked to provide their impressions of the benefits of the Classroom Connect Project and any limiting factors. (See Appendix 2 for survey questions). Participants posted or faxed completed surveys to Mercy Works. There were 43 responses returned, from 19 school representatives and 24 volunteer tutors. Survey results were submitted anonymously, with participants being asked to identify their school and whether they were a staff member or a volunteer tutor.

### **Data analysis**

Survey data were transferred to an *Excel* spreadsheet. For Question 1, responses on the Likert Scale were converted to column graphs to display ratings from co-ordinators, tutors and both groups. For Question 2, data were coded by grouping under three general headings: student-related issues (from both teachers and tutors), teacher comments or tutor comments. All data from survey forms were collated and comments on similar themes were grouped together. For Questions 3 and 4, data were grouped by school as the responses referred to specific site issues.

The following findings are based mainly on the 2008 and 2009 qualitative evaluations, with supplementary support from the 2010 survey. To maintain confidentiality, the names of schools or individuals have not been included in the findings. Quotations are identified by participant label - student, tutor or teacher - appearing in brackets after each comment.

### **Findings and discussion**

This section highlights key findings of the Classroom Connect research along with discussion of key issues arising in the research. The first finding elucidates the types of activities undertaken by tutors and students in classrooms and in withdrawal situations. Next, several important benefits for students are presented, with supporting quotations from research interviews. Evidence will be provided that schools value the contribution of the tutors and recognise the benefits of Classroom Connect for students. Several models of interaction (in-class vs withdrawal, small-group vs one-on-one) will also be discussed. Finally, key opportunities for improvement will be outlined.

#### **Tutor-student activities**

The type of activities undertaken by tutors and students depends on the model of interaction (which will be discussed in more detail below). In most schools, tutors sit with students in mainstream classes and also withdraw individuals or small groups, mostly to the library. In the classroom, tutors explain the wording of questions, help

students to complete worksheets and activities, keep students on-task and encourage students to read and listen to the teacher.

In withdrawal sessions, it is common for tutors to help students with assessment tasks. Activities undertaken in withdrawal sessions include explaining the wording of assignments and assessment tasks, helping complete research activities on the internet and assisting students to plan and complete assessment tasks. Tutors also explain vocabulary and syllabus concepts, read to or with students and help with the completion of worksheets and activities provided by the classroom teacher.

### **Benefits for students**

All three evaluations showed that students were gaining benefits from contact with their Classroom Connect tutors. In the academic area, Classroom Connect has demonstrated meaningful support for students in managing difficult subjects and completing assessment tasks and homework. Due to the research design, it was not possible to evaluate academic improvement in terms of grades or exam marks. While the school co-ordinators stated that they thought the tutors had helped the students in their learning gain, there was no hard evidence to support this. As English language acquisition for pre-literate learners with a history of disrupted education is a very slow process, “progress needs to be measured in small increments” (Cranitch, 2008, p.5) and there were no measurement processes in place in the school to provide data for inclusion in this research. Instead, the benefits of the project for students focused more on the social and emotional aspects of schooling.

Many young people from refugee backgrounds struggle to face the challenges of schooling, including the tacit rules, regulations, procedures and expectations of schools and classrooms, such as sitting still, organising books and equipment, holding a pen and completing homework (Brown et al., 2006; Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Luizzi & Saker, 2008). The research indicated a positive impact on students’ organisational skills. One teacher’s aide acknowledged that a student’s organisational skills and attention in class had improved due to the efforts and influence of a tutor.

I think she (the tutor) did really good work with him. Yesterday I checked his bag and everything was there. This was a positive sign that he has learnt something from her in terms of participating in class and organising his materials. (teacher’s aide)

Students expressed appreciation at receiving support with particular subject areas or classes they found difficult.

I want help in English, all the time. (student)

I need help with Maths and Science. I need someone to say “concentrate, concentrate.” (student)

Coming to this school, there’s some teachers who talk quick and some words I’ve never heard before. I need someone to explain, and teachers don’t have time. (student)

Sometimes there are big words you can't understand. Geography and History and Science are the hardest. (student)

Even in Year 7, secondary school subjects require high level skills in organisation, reading and researching, sorting and synthesising information, and finally, writing or speaking in highly specialised subject-specific ways (Unsworth, 2005). It is well documented that the disrupted schooling background of many students from refugee backgrounds has a significant negative effect on language and literacy development. As a result, many students have inadequate language and literacy capacity for sophisticated subject-specific contexts (Brown et al., 2006; Cranitch, 2008). The students in this research clearly appreciated support in meeting subject-specific classroom needs, particularly regarding subject assessment tasks.

Depending on the subject, assessment tasks include research assignments, essays or other written work, posters, speeches, practical tasks (like making a cushion or designing a bird house) as well as preparing for examinations. Students from refugee backgrounds may have gaps that extend beyond English language ability: "gaps in cognitive skill, concepts of literacy, undeveloped or culturally distant understandings about the world" (Cranitch, 2008, p. 26). As one tutor commented:

The thing that he (the student) doesn't have is cultural knowledge and understanding about education. He doesn't get the point of assessment tasks, so he has no motivation to complete them...It just makes no sense to him.  
(tutor)

Tutors have an important role in assisting students by explaining and trying to bridge these gaps.

Assessment tasks are highly stressful obstacles for the students to negotiate, especially when there are several tasks due at the same time from different subjects. Tutors not only help students complete the task, they also assist with managing the stress of doing the task.

Assignments are hard. I did what I understand and I leave the rest. Maybe the teacher will shout. (student)

They (tutors) say, "The assessment is easy. Don't worry." They try to comfort me and tell me not to panic. When I have a lot of assessments due my brain gets mixed. (student)

When we get an assignment, we do half and wait for the tutors to come and help. (student)

Before attempting an assessment task, there is the additional hurdle of understanding the question. Tutors report that students cannot interpret assignment sheets unassisted.

For an assignment, the initial thing is to spend a session going through the assessment sheet, with the criteria and everything. They often don't

understand what the question is. They can't get through the way the thing is set out. We also help them with research and then how to structure it. (tutor)

Oral tasks, such as speeches in front of the class, are particularly problematic as they place students in a stressful, public situation where their skill deficits are highly visible to their peers.

She (the student) had to give her oral speech in history. She said I'm really scared and I don't want to do this. It was really traumatic for her. (tutor)

Tutors have a valuable role in giving students scaffolded support in preparing and rehearsing their speeches in a supportive environment.

We sat down and worked through a speech. We were in the library and we worked it out and he (the student) practised it. In the end he got 13 out of 20 for it. He was just overcome... delighted, because he got up and did the speech. (tutor)

Homework commonly causes problems for students from refugee backgrounds and some researchers have recommended homework centres as possible solutions (Brown et al., 2006; Ferfolja et al., 2009). Cranitch (2008) also found that the inability of parents to assist with homework and assignments created additional obstacles for students. Students involved with Classroom Connect also cited homework as problematic due to the lack of support available at home or difficulties understanding what to do.

Homework is the hardest. They give us a lot of homework and sometimes I need help with some questions, especially History... sometimes in the question, I don't understand the meaning of the word. (student)  
For me, I'm at home by myself. If I don't understand the question and the assessment or anything, there's no-one to go to, "Can you help me with this? Can you make me understand this?" .... I go home and there's no-one to help me understand it, if I don't do it tomorrow I'm going to get in trouble, and I don't know how to do it. (student)

One of the most significant benefits for students was therefore help with homework and assignments from the Classroom Connect tutor.

Social benefits for students have been enabled by the development of mentoring relationships between tutors and students. School staff commented consistently on positive relationships between the tutors and students.

The connection made with someone (not a teacher) outside school with a different approach is great. (teacher)  
They (students) enjoy having someone one-to-one, whom they feel they can talk to. (teacher)

I think it's more than the academic help. It's also the relationship, the support.  
(teacher)  
Students' confidence and self esteem are increased as a result of the relationships developed with the volunteers. (teacher)

Recent Victorian research found that mentoring is an effective strategy to assist young people from refugee backgrounds in their transition to life in Australia. Mentoring has been found to have benefits for young people including increasing confidence, improving career opportunities, reducing risk-taking behaviour and alleviating isolation (Victorian Department of Planning and Community Developments, 2005; Sawrikar et al., 2008). Growth in student confidence due to tutoring and mentoring has also been reported by the RAS Project (Ferfolja et al., 2008).

Students made many comments about their positive feelings towards tutors and their sense of growing confidence and understanding. In particular, students noticed the tutors' personal qualities of kindness, friendliness and willingness to talk to them about anything.

You feel good when they help you. (student)  
They're nice and they're really friendly. I feel close to them. (student)  
They come to us. You can ask any question you want. She (the tutor) can answer it. I like her. I feel comfortable around her. If another person has to help me, I'm going to be nervous to asking other question. But she always says, if you have anything, just ask. You don't have to be shy. (student)  
She helps me. Sometimes when I'm sad, she asks me to tell her why I am sad. (student)

Tutors also reported a sense of personal satisfaction for their role in boosting student self esteem and confidence.

I think the self esteem goes with that they feel a bit special. They like the fact that we're here for them. They're kind of quite proud that we're here for them. (tutor)  
I think that perhaps just being here has given her a bit more confidence. (tutor)

This indicates that nurturing student self esteem and confidence through mentoring is a significant benefit of the Classroom Connect project. This is particularly important considering that schooling success depends on "the student's general ability, motivation and resilience" (Cranitch, 2008, p. 25), qualities that can be enhanced by mentoring.

### **The value of Classroom Connect for schools**

Teachers in participating schools value the professionalism of the tutors and their extensive experience. Since most of the Classroom Connect tutors are retired teachers, school staff recognise the maturity and wisdom of the volunteers.

In many cases the tutors are more experienced than any of the staff, and very savvy and extremely learned. (teacher)

Several school co-ordinators and teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the limited resources available to support refugee students in their school. They recognised that Classroom Connect enabled students to have additional support in an environment of limited resources.

We're desperate. We need as much help as we can. (teacher)

The program is valuable at my school because of the high and increasing number of recent arrival students and the relatively small amount of ESL support available to them from staff allocation. (teacher)

Comments such as these are supported by other research findings about limited school resources and inadequate teacher training to meet the needs of students from backgrounds of disrupted schooling (Olliff, 2010; Refugee Education Partnership Project; 2007). Schools acknowledge that Classroom Connect provides resources that are needed to help refugee students within the constraints of mainstream secondary schools.

These findings indicate that the Classroom Connect Project enables tutors and students to develop supportive relationships which enhance a student's ability to tackle the academic demands of secondary schooling and grow in self-esteem and confidence.

### **Evaluation of interaction models**

As part of the project evaluations, models of interaction were discussed. Each school has a different interaction model and the program has trialled a variety of in-class, withdrawal, individual and group interactions. It is worthwhile outlining the main advantages and disadvantages of possible models for consideration by other organisations seeking to meet the needs of refugee students through support programs.

In the in-class model, the tutor sits in the classroom next to the student during a regular lesson conducted by the subject teacher. In a variation of this model, sometimes the tutor assists a small group of students in the regular classroom. Withdrawal models involve the tutor working with an individual or a group of students in a location that is not the regular classroom, such as the library.

Six of the Classroom Connect schools use a combination of small groups and one-on-one support. One school has a one-on-one interaction model only. Two schools have in-class support only, while five schools have a combination of in-class and withdrawal. One school has support for students in Year 8 Science only, while the other schools deploy volunteers to support subject areas across the curriculum. Feedback from teachers, students and tutors showed that there are pros and cons for each of the models of interaction.

*In class vs withdrawal*

In the regular class, the main benefit is that the student can keep up with class work and homework, and the tutor can see where the class is up to in the unit of work. Some students prefer the opportunity to complete a practical task with their peers rather than be withdrawn and “miss out”.

However, if receiving support in class, students did not want to receive help in a conspicuous way, for fear of being stigmatised. In addition to adjusting to settlement in a new country, young people from refugee backgrounds must “negotiate family, peer, individual and community expectations within a context of adolescence” (O’Sullivan & Olliff, 2006, p. 1). One student commented that she did not want the tutor to sit with her in class, due to unwelcome attention she received:

I don’t like being with her (the tutor) in class. All Year 7s are sitting, looking, and she’s next to me and it’s not good. I would like to go to the library or computer room or maybe in a small room. (student)

In some class situations, support from a tutor may make the student vulnerable to teasing or bullying. As Cranitch (2008, p. 26) noted, there is a need to “balance English language, literacy and learning needs with the social and emotional needs of students”.

Another advantage of withdrawal is that some students feel that they can concentrate more easily in a quieter environment.

She (the tutor) helps me in the classroom. Sometimes they take us out. Taking out is better. We understand more. In the classroom is not good. Children talking, teacher talking. It’s not good. (student)

When lessons are “chalk and talk”, where the teacher spends most of the class time speaking, there is nothing constructive for the tutor to do. Comments from two tutors illustrate this point:

With some teachers, you are a bit of an add on, oh what can we do with this person here. They’re not really expecting you. And for some lessons, you’re really not doing much. (tutor)

You have to know what you’re going to do. Otherwise you’re sort of forgotten and you walk around trying to look busy. They (the teachers) don’t know what to do with you. (tutor)

Additionally, tutors may find it more difficult to build rapport with the student as there are few chances to speak confidentially and openly during regular class.

The benefits of withdrawal are that the student can receive individualised attention and help with assessment tasks. The student and tutor have the opportunity to build rapport. A quieter learning space, such as the library, may also enable greater concentration for the student. On the other hand, if students are withdrawn from class, they may miss out

on class work or homework. They may have to catch up on the work they missed, leaving them further behind.

#### *Group vs one-on-one support*

Some tutors work with small groups from three to seven students. The advantage of this model is that there is less chance for an individual student to feel stigmatised. From a logistical point of view, if a few students are missing or absent on a particular day, the tutor still has other students to assist. Despite these advantages, the tutor may find it difficult to build rapport with individual students and the opportunity for mentoring relationships may be diminished. A mentoring study involving young people from refugee backgrounds also found that group mentoring resulted in less attention for individuals than in a one-on-one situation. As a result, trusting mentoring relationships were harder to establish (Sawrikar et al., 2008, p. 43).

In cases of one-on-one interaction models, students are likely to feel special and enjoy the personalised attention. Tutors are able to help each student depending on their particular needs at that time, and what assessment tasks might be due (or overdue). A mentoring relationship is likely to develop with time. However, if the student is absent on the day the tutor visits, without a “backup plan” of reserve students to help, the tutor’s time may be wasted.

In summary, findings of the research show that the individual contexts of schools, classes and individual students must be considered in developing a preferred interaction model. Senior students tend to prefer withdrawal. However, for junior students, a flexible combination of both situations is supported by these research data. If an in-class model is used, several criteria should be considered to minimise any negative social consequences for the student, and to maximise the value of the tutor’s involvement. Ideally, classroom tables should be set up in groups, not rows facing the front, to facilitate the tutor working with a group. The lesson should be based on student-centred activities, not “chalk and talk” or a video. If something special is happening in class, such as a practical activity or an assessment task being given out, the student should not miss the lesson.

#### *One subject or many subjects*

In one school, students are supported in Year 7 and Year 8 Science only. In the other schools, students receive support in a range of subjects, mostly dependent on the timetable at the time the tutors visit. In the Science-only school, tutors were given a box of resources by the Science Co-ordinator containing small books about scientific topics as well as skills worksheets, such as reading tables and graphs. The benefit of support in Science-only, is that the tutors can assist in a subject area that students find particularly difficult (Brown et al., 2006). Another advantage is that tutors receive formalised curriculum support from teachers. For this model to be effective, it is vital for the tutors to be familiar with the Science curriculum, as the evaluations showed that tutors without a Science background struggled with the content and felt less confident in supporting students.

**Limiting factors: Time and logistics**

While Classroom Connect has demonstrated meaningful benefits for students, the sustainability of the project depends, to some degree, on time commitments from school staff for liaison and co-ordination of tutors. Each participating school in the Classroom Connect Project has a co-ordinating teacher who liaises with the tutors regularly, to identify and allocate students for support and assist with logistical issues. Usually, the co-ordinating teacher has significant responsibilities for Learning Support or ESL, and organising Classroom Connect is an additional requirement. In most cases, the co-ordinating teachers do not receive any additional resources or time allocation from the school to help them deal with the logistical needs of the project. It is worth considering that although the project is “free”, it adds a burden on teachers who are already busy and therefore requires a considerable commitment on the part of participating schools.

Without intensive co-ordination within the school, there can be gaps in communication which lead to tutor frustration. Tutors are not officially on staff in a school, so they can miss out on standard school communications, such as finding out about excursions, exams and extended assemblies which interrupt the regular school timetable. At times, tutors have arrived to find their students unavailable or absent from school. While student absences may not be within the control of co-ordinating teachers, tutors have found it most helpful when they have copies of student timetables and lists of “backup” students if their regular students are away.

Another issue that is critical for success of the project is the alignment of tutor responsibilities with their teaching backgrounds. In past evaluations, issues were raised by tutors who felt a lack of confidence in teaching subjects like Science. To alleviate these concerns, the Classroom Connect Project co-ordinators have tried to match the needs of the school with the teaching background of tutors. This remains a difficult logistical issue and is not always possible due to tutor availability and school timetabling.

A high level of liaison is required between Classroom Connect Project co-ordinators, in-school co-ordinators and volunteers in each school. The more regular and open the communication between these stakeholders, the more likely it is for the project to be sustainable.

**Transferability of the Classroom Connect model**

Classroom Connect may be an interesting model for other organisations seeking to provide support for young people from refugee backgrounds. The involvement of mostly retired teachers as tutors means that professional, experienced educators can be provided for students at little cost. There are some costs associated with co-ordination of the project by Mercy Works and by participating schools. It is possible that this support model would be effective in areas of refugee settlement where there are also populations of retired teachers, such as larger towns and cities. For example, in mid-2011, Classroom Connect commenced a project in Melbourne with fifteen volunteers

in three secondary schools. It would be difficult to reproduce this model in smaller towns and rural areas where retired teachers do not reside. Another characteristic of Classroom Connect is the supportive partnership between the charity or project manager (in this case, Mercy Works) and an educational system (the Catholic Education Office and/or Department of Education) as well as individual schools. Therefore, to replicate this model, the establishment of educational partnerships is needed, to ensure that all stakeholders have common goals and a commitment to project outcomes.

## **Conclusions**

Classroom Connect is making a difference for students of refugee backgrounds in some secondary schools in Sydney. Even after their transition from IECs, students continue to need individualised academic and social support as they progress through the grades (Brown et al., 2006; Chegwidden & Thompson, 2008).

The small size of this study makes wider application of findings inappropriate, however there are relevant patterns in the outcomes between schools. Research with students, co-ordinating teachers and tutors has shown that Classroom Connect provides personalised and tailored help for students in a supportive environment, leading to the development of beneficial mentoring relationships. The benefits of these mentoring relationships in projects like Classroom Connect, and in other homework clubs and tutoring programs, have been shown to “have strong positive effects on children’s academic, social and emotional lives” (Refugee Education Partnership Project, 2007, p. 8). The social and emotional benefits of Classroom Connect have resulted in growing student confidence and self-esteem, supporting students to tackle the rigorous demands of subject-specific content, assessment and homework in the demanding secondary school environment.

As a model of supporting young people from refugee backgrounds, Classroom Connect has the potential to be sustainable, as volunteer tutors are mostly experienced, professional teachers, contributing free services to an academic environment of limited funding and capacity. The limiting factors of the project involve logistical issues involving tutor availability, time for planning and management at a local school level, and the need for constant liaison and communication between Classroom Connect Project stakeholders.

According to this research, Classroom Connect is a student-centred project that improves the capacity of young people from refugee backgrounds to negotiate the challenges of mainstream schooling and grow in confidence and well-being.

Note: From 2011, the project will be known as Mercy Connect Sydney.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview questions: Research evaluations 2008-2009**

### **Classroom Connect tutors' interview questions:**

1. What types of activities are you doing in the classroom? in the school?
2. What types of activities does your student do while you are with them?
3. How do you assist them?
4. Are you involved with other students in the class?
5. What do you think is working or helping?
6. What outcomes do you see for the project? Who benefits from the project?
7. What factors are limiting the effectiveness of the project?
8. Could these factors be addressed or improved? How?
9. What other comments or recommendations do you have?

### **School co-ordinators' and teachers' interview questions:**

1. What is your overall impression of the Classroom Connect project?
2. What are the needs of the particular communities of students at your school?
3. What types of activities are the volunteers and students engaging in?
4. In your opinion, how does having a volunteer impact on the student's engagement with and completion of activities in the classroom?
5. Are the refugee students experiencing benefits and if so, what is working? If not, why not?
6. What are the perceived outcomes for students, teachers, families, schools and volunteers?
7. What factors are limiting the effectiveness of the project?
8. Could these factors be addressed or improved?
9. What other comments or recommendations do you have?

### **Students' interview questions:**

1. What is your favourite subject? Why?
2. What is your least favourite subject? Why?
3. What do you find hard at school?
4. What do you think of having an adult volunteer with you? Do you like it or not like it? Why?
5. What does your adult volunteer do with you? for you?
6. Has a tutor taken you out of regular class to work with you? What was that like? Would you rather have a tutor with you in regular class or in a smaller group outside the class?
7. What is it like when your adult volunteer is not with you in class?
8. What would you like more help with?
9. What can we do to improve or make the project better for you?
10. Would you like to have a tutor next year? Why/why not?
11. How often would you like to have a tutor? in what classes? in what subjects?

## Appendix 2: 2010 evaluation: Survey questions

1. Rate the following statement by placing a tick on the scale:

Classroom Connect effectively meets the needs of the targeted students at this school.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

2. What are the advantages of the project from your perspective?
3. What suggestions do you have to improve the effectiveness of the project in your school?
4. Do you have any other comments?

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Note: from 2011, the Classroom Connect Project is known as Mercy Connect Sydney.

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