

EDUCATING CHILDREN FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND PARENTS

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The Relationships to Enhance Accessible Learning (REAL) project was conducted from 2013 to 2015 by Foundation House (VFST, The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.) within the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP), which is supported by the Department of Education and Training (DET). This background paper was developed throughout the REAL Project and was prepared for Foundation House (VFST) by Jenny Mitchell in 2014. This paper underpins *Schools and Families in Partnership: A Desktop Guide to Engaging Families from Refugee Backgrounds in their Children's Learning*, available here: www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-support-program-resources

This background paper was produced to support schools partnering with families from refugee backgrounds to enhance access to their children's learning. Readers are reminded that this is a background paper only. The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture Inc. cannot be held responsible for error or any consequences arising from the use of information contained in this guide. The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture Inc. disclaims all responsibility for any loss or damage which may be suffered or caused by any person relying on the information contained herein.

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1. PROJECT BACKGROUND

International research has shown that parental engagement (of various kinds) has a positive impact on many indicators of student achievement, including:

- higher grades and test scores
- enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes
- higher successful completion of classes
- lower drop-out rates
- higher graduation rates
- a greater likelihood of commencing post-secondary education¹



Relationships to Enhance Accessible Learning
A Community Engagement Strategy Supporting Schools and Families of Refugee Background

The Relationships to Enhance Accessible Learning (REAL) project was conducted from 2013 to 2015 by Foundation House (VFST, The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture) within the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP), which is supported by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The REAL Project encouraged dialogue between parents² from refugee backgrounds and schools to establish best practice techniques for parent engagement. The project aimed to enhance students' education as a result of this partnership, and the model and its outcomes will be disseminated to Victorian schools. The importance of family-school partnerships has been recognised at both federal and state levels of education³ and the project's resources will assist schools to achieve such partnerships with parents from refugee backgrounds. While it is important for schools to explicitly address the needs of refugee-background families, strategies outlined in this document are likely to be of benefit to all parents.

Students from refugee backgrounds are highly likely to be disadvantaged when attending school in Australia. In addition to traumatic experiences of war and displacement, they may lack English language and have had limited schooling. While parental support is important to a child's education, many parents from refugee backgrounds have themselves had little access to schooling. They are unfamiliar with the Australian school system, may have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and their English language may be limited. They may feel unable to help their children with school work.

The REAL Project was designed to encourage parents' engagement in their children's education, regardless of their own educational background. In 2013–2014, the project brought together parents from refugee backgrounds and school leadership teams as advisory groups in five state schools in Victoria. There were three primary schools, one secondary school and one P–12. The schools are located in Dandenong, Mooroolbark, Laverton, Roxburgh Park and Traralgon. Schools participating in the project have an established relationship with Foundation House including participating in a Refugee Action Network (now Refugee Education Support Program), and are known for their whole-school approach to cultural awareness and an understanding of the refugee experience. This foundation was important to developing project strategies and achieving its parent engagement objectives. Parents were selected from a growing ethnic community within each school and the project assisted them to recognise ways in which they could support their children's education. Parents came from Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Burma (both Chin and Karen ethnic groups).

¹ Emerson L., Fear J., Fox S., and Sanders E. (2012). *Parental Engagement in Learning and Schooling: Lessons from Research*. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau: Canberra.

² Children from refugee backgrounds may be cared for by members of an extended family or family friends if parents have been lost. Some refugee minors may also be in state care. The term 'parent' in this report is used to encompass all such relationships.

³ Examples are the Federal Government's *Family-School Partnerships Framework: A Guide for Schools and Families* (2008); *Victoria's Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development* (2008), which includes partnerships with parents as one of its three core strategies for improving student outcomes.

Across the five schools participating in the REAL Project, advisory groups agreed on the following definition for all parent engagement activities:

'A two-way collaboration between families and schools based on good communication, trusting relationships and respectful partnerships, with the goal of enhancing children's education'

The project recognised that when engaging with families from refugee backgrounds, this definition must be set within the context of schools that embrace a whole-school approach to cultural awareness and have an understanding of the refugee experience. Advice on this whole-school approach is provided in the Foundation House publication *School's In for Refugees: A Whole-School Approach to Supporting Students from Refugee Background* (2011).⁴

Schools that plan to use *Schools and Families in Partnership: A Desktop Guide to Engaging Families from Refugee Backgrounds in their Children's Learning* may be at the beginning of their journey of supporting students from refugee backgrounds, or may be developing the skills to do so or may be experienced in a whole-school approach. The guide will be useful to all of these schools as it reflects wise advice offered and tested by experienced schools and parent advisers in the REAL Project.

⁴ www.foundationhouse.org.au/schools-in-for-refugees

2. PROJECT MODEL

In order to build the capacity of parents and schools to engage with each other, the project established advisory groups consisting of parents from refugee backgrounds and school leadership teams. Advisory groups came together up to 16 times in formal meetings and focused on ways in which the partnership between parents and schools can assist children’s education. Advisory groups considered why parent engagement with schools is important to children’s education and explored the parent engagement contexts in each school. By the end of 2013, advisory groups had selected parent engagement activities to work on in 2014. Over that year, advisers participated in 10 parent engagement activities on the school calendar and evaluated whether they were accessible and useful for parents from their community.

Advisory group meetings were facilitated and supported by Foundation House staff, and a record of all meetings has contributed to the desktop guide. Interpreters and school multicultural education aides (MEAs) from the parents’ community were present at meetings and this was essential for parents to understand and contribute to discussions. Parents were paid an honorarium at each meeting to cover their out-of-pocket expenses.

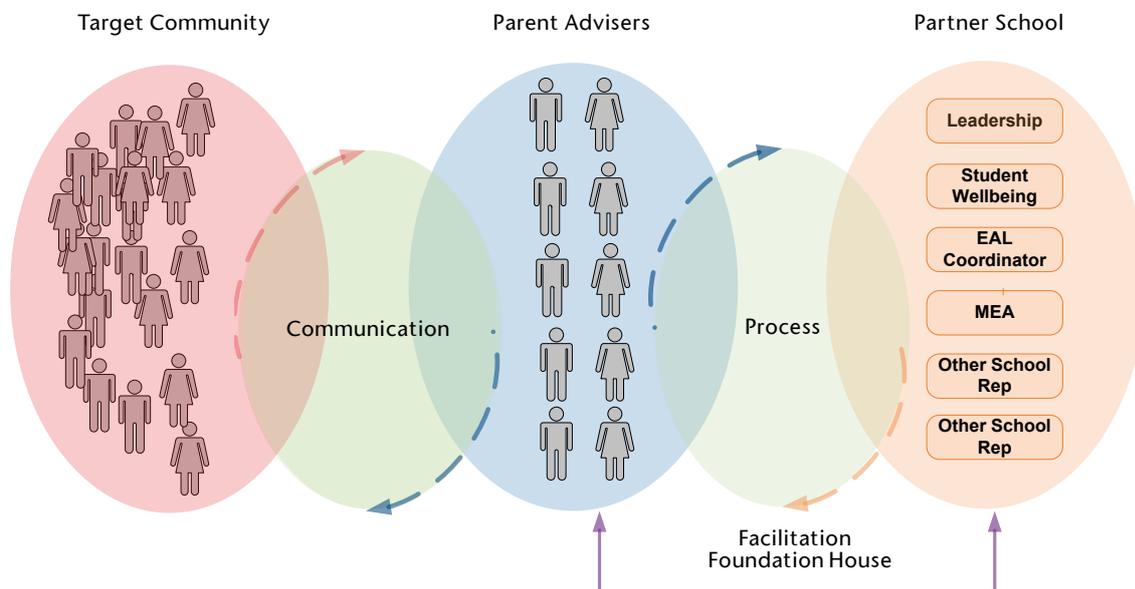


Figure 1. The strategy model

The project was conducted in three stages from 2013 to 2014:

1. Foundation House and schools came together to agree on the project model, process and aims. They established timelines, roles and responsibilities, and signed a formal partnership agreement. Schools agreed to select parents from a growing refugee community in their school to contribute to an advisory group. Those parents were to have children at the school, be able to share knowledge gained from the project throughout their community, be able to participate for at least 18 months and be committed to the project and their children's education. Up to 10 parents who had been in Australia for over 2 years were seen as an ideal number for each school.⁵
2. Foundation House facilitated meetings with parent advisers and school leadership teams. There were two initial workshops with parents only, in order to familiarise them with each other, with the processes of formal meetings (which were new to many), and with project aims. School leadership teams joined four further meetings in which there were discussions on the differences between education in Australia and advisers' home countries, and parent engagement opportunities in Australian schools generally and in their children's school in particular.
3. Parent advisers and school leadership teams continued to meet on a monthly basis and worked on 10 strategies for parent engagement in their school. They considered how those activities were currently conducted and whether there were any barriers to engagement by parents from refugee backgrounds. Where necessary, they proposed adjustments to the activities and tested the revised version. Once the activity had been trialled, schools and parent advisers evaluated the outcome and made further suggestions for the future. The processes were again facilitated by Foundation House, and schools commented on the importance of involving an external agency with expertise in working with parents from refugee backgrounds.

Schools with sufficient resources may consider implementing the project model within their own communities or simply making use of parent engagement strategies that have been trialled and evaluated, and are documented in the following sections. REAL advisory groups identified five main contexts for parent engagement activities in schools. These contexts are communication, interactions between parents and teachers, equipping parents to support their children, transition and contributing to the school. In addition, there were more general discussions on other activities that might involve parents in the life of a school, such as cultural celebrations, fundraising events, parents' social groups, school concerts and information sessions. Good communication strategies were essential for parents of refugee background to feel included in these and other activities outlined below.

⁵ Newly arrived parents from refugee backgrounds have many settlement issues to deal with, such as studying English, finding permanent housing, addressing health needs, and negotiating with government and non-government services. It was felt that participation in the REAL Project would be an added burden for this group.

3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Good communication is fundamental to engaging parents from refugee backgrounds in school activities and practices to support their children's education. When developing a definition for parent engagement activities, all the advisory groups emphasised the need for good communication between families and schools and the need for schools to respect, acknowledge and celebrate diversity. One group spoke about feeling welcome at the school because the school has a multicultural environment reflecting Australian society. In another school, the principal was learning the language of the dominant community of parents from refugee backgrounds, resulting in parents feeling connected to the principal and her staff team. All parent advisers were keen to have a relationship with teachers that encouraged a two-way dialogue.

Throughout the REAL Project, parent advisers demonstrated that knowledge about the Australian education system and their child's school is related to their level of English language. If a parent spoke little English and had limited education they were effectively excluded from schools that did not use interpreters as a matter of course. Written material sent home in English could not be read without help and if help was unavailable, notes and newsletters were inaccessible. Older children could help with translations but parents felt that their dependence on a child impacted on their authority. Children might also misinterpret the content.

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AIDES

All five schools in the REAL Project employed MEAs who were an invaluable support to parents. The MEAs were well connected to their community, often seeing parents at the weekend at religious or social gatherings. They kept parents informed about important events at the school. They were personable and proactive, identifying parents who needed the most help to access school information and guiding them in the right direction. This was particularly important to new arrivals in Australia. They advised teachers on cultural matters and issues raised by parents, and they helped children from their community in the classroom. However, discussions between parent advisers and school teams in the REAL Project identified communication barriers that could not be addressed solely by MEAs, considering they are not employed as interpreters, and advisory groups proposed improvements for schools to implement.

Some parents stated they are reluctant to approach teachers directly because of language and cultural barriers, and regard MEAs as their conduit to the school. They share with the MEA any concerns they have about their child or the school, and the MEA may answer queries or make an appointment for a parent to speak with a teacher. In the absence of interpreters, the MEA may sit in on meetings between parent and teacher to support both.

The MEA Handbook (2008) produced by the DEECD suggests that MEA language skills should be used for communicating with students and parents, including translating basic school notices. However, in many schools MEAs may be called on to use their language skills more extensively for such tasks as translating the school newsletter or interpreting at parent/teacher interviews. This is particularly true in rural areas where obtaining interpreters is logistically difficult. Additionally, any teacher may feel more comfortable calling on an MEA they know rather than organising and working through an interpreter when speaking with parents.

The *MEA Handbook* outlines an MEA's responsibilities as:

- Effective communication between students and teachers in the classroom
- Integrating ESL learners into school activities by helping them to understand school expectations and goals
- Assisting teachers to understand the home cultures and the expectations families have of the school and of education in general
- Assisting newly arrived families in their settlement into the new educational community

If, in practice, interpreting and translating are added to the list above, MEAs in schools with a large cohort of students from their community may be stretched in many directions. Advisory groups appreciated the need to support MEAs and ensure their position descriptions are clear. One school in the REAL Project employs two MEAs – one to focus on students in the classroom and the other to facilitate communication with parents. The two work closely together. Advisory group discussions identified MEA tasks that improved their communication and involvement with schools. MEAs:

- Keep parents informed of school events and activities and encourage them to participate.
- Help parents to make appointments (such as for parent/teacher interviews or individual meetings with teachers) and remind them shortly before of the date and time. Some groups spoke about the problem of understanding calendars. Reminders to attend appointments from the MEA are important.
- Support parents already engaged in school activities, such as helping in the classroom and working bees.
- Help parents to complete forms (e.g. enrolment).
- Liaise with teachers to advise parents if a child is having a problem at school and encourage parents to speak with the teacher.

Advisers made the point that they choose the school for their children based on whether an MEA of their language group is available.

INTERPRETING

Parent advisers emphasised that interpreters are crucial to good communication between school and parents. However, use of interpreters appears to be patchy in schools. Some teachers are encouraged to make use of interpreters as a matter of course, while others are confused about when and how to use them. Advisory groups suggested that teachers should be trained in the use of interpreters and routinely employ them when speaking with parents with limited English. Parents are often too embarrassed to admit they do not understand a teacher's comments and are unaware that they can request an interpreter.

In advisory group discussions, parents gave examples of consequences when interpreters are unavailable. Interpreters are not always available at school information sessions, and parents may miss out on important information such as how to understand reports or career pathways. This left them unable to advise their children or understand why their children had made certain subject choices. Parents also gave examples of leaving parent/teacher interviews with little knowledge of their child's progress because an interpreter was unavailable or because the interpreting was below standard. They suggested schools should monitor interpreting to make sure it is of a high standard.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Advisory groups suggested that school notices, letters and newsletters should be translated if parents are to engage with the school and follow school procedures. In one REAL school, for example, parents were unaware what clothes their children should take to school for swimming lessons, and consequently, children did not learn to swim.

While some parents may not be able to read in their own language, translated information is important for those who can. Children may be able to translate for parents, however there is the possibility of them misrepresenting important information from the school.

REAL advisory groups had a number of discussions about newsletters. Parents were unable to understand all content, but sought help to translate the calendar of school events. They enjoyed the photographs in the newsletter, and one school reduced text and featured photographs and illustrations

wherever possible. One principal emphasised the importance of newsletters for not only providing information on school events but also promoting the school's identity and celebrating students' achievements. Parents from refugee backgrounds were unable to share this pride in the school if they were not able to understand the newsletter.

Processes used by REAL schools for improving written communication included:

- All notices sent home are reduced to the key information and translated. Teachers commented that notices are often wordy, and can in fact be contained to a few lines.
- Notices that require parental permission are printed on a specific colour paper and, once aware of this, parents recognise that they must sign and return the form.
- Notice boards in the language of parents from refugee backgrounds are established in well promoted and accessible locations in the school.
- Notices displayed in the school are translated.
- The principal meets with the MEA each time the newsletter is produced to discuss which points are the most important for the community. As a result, a page of translated information is distributed to parents in the required language group. The school ensures the MEA workload allows for this within school time.
- An audio file is made available on the school website of the most important newsletter content.
- A dedicated telephone line contains a recording of key points in the newsletter and parents are encouraged to phone the line recorded in their language.
- Students are invited to write newsletter articles in their own language, which are accessible to their community.

TECHNOLOGY

Schools increasingly use technology to encourage parent engagement, but parent advisers spoke about their difficulties in accessing online information. Not all parents from refugee backgrounds have access to computers and the internet, and those who do may be unfamiliar with their use or may be unable to read in English or their own language. Some schools provide access to classes for parents that support them to learn both English language and use of computers.

Advisory groups proposed strategies that may be helpful to parents:

- MEAs make use of smart-phone apps, such as Viber to establish group messages to the parent community.
- Schools create a DVD giving advice to parents. This might include, for example, demonstrations on how to help their children at home or help in the classroom.
- A dedicated telephone line is established with key messages from the school.
- A folder containing audio files and containing key information is uploaded to the school website and parents are supported to access it.
- The school website is available in multiple languages.

4. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Advisory groups in all schools regarded a trusting relationship between school and parents to be fundamental to any formal or informal interaction between them. Most parents came from countries where teachers were so highly regarded that there was little interaction between the two. Parents did not dare to speak with teachers and teachers did not deign to speak with parents. This cultural practice is strong enough to discourage parents from approaching teachers in Australia, leaving schools with a responsibility to establish inclusive practices and reach out to parents.

INFORMAL INTERACTION

Opportunities for informal interaction between schools and parents were identified by advisory groups. These include:

- Chatting in the school yard at drop-off and pick-up times
- Chatting at special activities, such as open days, school concerts, sports days, book week readings
- Chatting to school staff when attending school celebrations such as Harmony Day, Diversity Week, Mothers and Fathers Days

Parents were particularly keen to participate in social events with teachers, and 'get to know each other' afternoon or morning tea sessions were proposed in a number of schools.

FORMAL INTERACTION

Opportunities for more formal interactions between schools and parents were identified by advisory groups. These included:

- Individual meetings with teachers at the request of either teacher or parent
- Information sessions, with external speakers or teachers providing information to support students (e.g. careers advice, how to help children at home, understanding reports)
- Helping in the classroom or at events such as excursions or sports days
- Orientation to the school when a student enrolls
- Focus groups
- School council
- Parent/teacher interviews
- Student-led conferences
- Learning walks

These topics are further explored in other sections of this paper.

One regional school in the REAL Project organised home visits by teachers. This came about at the beginning of the settlement of families from refugee background into the area and when there were few community services to support them. Monthly community catch-ups were also organised at the school. While these strategies were unsustainable and unnecessary as the community grew, there was a high level of trust between teachers and families because of their early contact.

Interaction between parents and teachers is successful when teachers make time to talk, are friendly, are culturally sensitive and respectful, treat parents as equals, and use interpreters or include the MEA in discussions. Parents also have a part to play in the interaction's success. In some cases, they have to overcome a lack of confidence and a cultural shyness to participate in a two-way conversation.

PARENT/TEACHER INTERVIEWS

Parent/teacher interviews were regarded as the most important of the more formal interactions between parents and teachers and they were discussed by all advisory groups in the five schools in the REAL Project. The majority of schools had two parent/teacher interviews each year. After listening to parents who advised the REAL Project, schools were able to attract the majority of parents from the target groups.

The following is a summary of practices that maximised participation of the project's target group in each school and could equally be of use to any non-English-speaking parent.

a) Booking appointments for parent/teacher interviews

Making an appointment for a parent/teacher interview is a challenge for parents who are unfamiliar with the Australian school system and who have limited English. Many schools use an online booking system for parent/teacher interviews, which can be difficult for communities from refugee backgrounds to use without training and access to computers. These are the steps that were most successful in promoting participation in the parent/teacher interviews by target groups in the REAL Project:

1. Parent/teacher interviews are promoted in a notice to parents, in the school's newsletter, to students in the classroom and by the MEA when talking to parents. One REAL school introduced a notice board into the Prep⁶ to Year 4 drop-off area, promoting the parent/teacher interview. This was in the language of the target community.
2. A notice about parent/teacher interviews is sent to parents via students, preferably translated into the parents' language.
3. The notice reminds parents of the names, subjects and photographs of their child's teachers so that parents know who to book an appointment with. The notice invites parents to book an appointment within nominated periods, with choice of morning, afternoon or evening. Parents are asked if they need an interpreter. If there is more than one parent, both parents are encouraged to attend the interview, along with their child.
4. Parents complete and return the appointment form to the school office. They request help from the MEA if unable to complete the form. If parents do not request an appointment, the school makes contact with them to explain the importance of the parent/teacher interview and to help complete the appointment form.
5. Once the parent/teacher interview appointment is made, a translated confirmation is sent to the parent. The confirmation note contains the date and time of the appointment and has names and photographs of the teachers they are to meet. Parents are advised to arrive 10 minutes early to allow interpreters to be allocated.
6. The MEA contacts parents the day before the interview to remind them to attend on time. Children are also asked to remind their parents.

b) Preparing for parent/teacher interviews

The first parent/teacher interview of the year tends to be a 'meet and greet' when teachers and parents get to know each other and share information about the child. Parent/teacher interviews later in the year focus on the child's progress, and a report may be sent to parents before the parent/teacher interviews. These steps were successful in preparing the target groups in the REAL Project to participate in parent/teacher interviews:

1. The school provides an interpreted information session about parent/teacher interviews, including a role play that demonstrates the importance of a two-way conversation between teacher and parent. Parents' and teachers' aims for the interview are shared, and are likely to include: getting to

⁶ Schools in the REAL Project used the name 'Prep' for the first year of Primary School rather than the term 'Foundation', which is gradually being introduced into schools. For this reason, 'Prep' is used throughout this document.

know each other and encouraging a positive relationship between parents and teacher; exchanging information about the child to help the child learn; and discussing the child's progress to identify areas for praise or improvement

2. The school provides translated questions for parents a week before the parent/teacher interviews. Teachers receive an English version of the questions to guide their discussion at the interview. The questions encourage parents to prepare what they want to say to teachers, and enhance teachers' and parents' confidence to engage in a two-way conversation. Questions early in the year cover what a child likes, what a child is good at, any worries a child might have, and parents' concerns. Questions later in the year focus on the child's progress and how parents can support their work at home. One teacher was so impressed with the questions prepared by a REAL advisory group that she gave them to parents of all her students, and used them to start every parent/teacher interview

Examples of questions proposed for parent/teacher interviews at the start of the year are summarised below.

The teacher may ask the parent:

- How to pronounce their name, and whether it has a meaning in their language
- Whether the child is happy and positive about school
- Whether the child is happy in class
- Whether the child has friends or is shy or lonely
- What the child enjoys doing
- How the child behaves at home
- What the child's interests are
- About family routines (e.g. meal times, bedtime)
- Whether the child has any medical problems (e.g. sight, hearing)
- Whether the child has any special requirements (e.g. toileting)
- Whether the parent has any concerns about the child
- What the child's favourite and less favourite subjects are
- The child's attitude to homework
- Whether the parent would like the child to have additional homework
- Whether the parent needs any additional information
- Whether an interpreter is needed if a parent is called to the school

The teacher may advise the parent about:

- Study schedule, course content and student tasks
- School expectations (e.g. amount of homework, reading at home)
- The child's academic progress and understanding of the work (referring to reports and samples of the child's work)
- Goals for the student
- How the child relates to the teacher

- The child's development, behaviour and attitude
- How the child interacts with others in the class
- Plans to help the child's progress at school
- Ways in which parents can help the child at home
- Any issues that have arisen for the child at school and how the school is addressing these
- After-hours programs that might interest the child (sports, music, homework group)

Examples of questions proposed for parent/teacher interviews later in the year are summarised below.

The parent may ask the teacher:

- How is my child going at school?
 - Is my child smart at school?
 - Is my child behaving well at school?
 - How can I help at home?
 - What can parents do at home to help the child's behaviour and attitude so that they are like other students in the school?
 - What is my child's English capability? Will they do well when they have to use English outside of the school environment?
 - Which subjects are my child's strengths?
 - Is my child acting appropriately and to the teacher's expectations in the classroom?
3. In some schools, reports are sent to parents via students, or posted, a week or two before the parent teacher interview. The reports are accompanied by a translated note encouraging parents to attend the parent/teacher interviews and talk about their child's progress with the subject teachers named in the report.
 4. The school holds an interpreted information session for parents on how to understand reports, prior to distributing them.
 5. The school books sufficient interpreters for the number of parents attending interviews and has a system that efficiently manages their allocation. At one REAL Project school, for example, interpreters were rostered for each family and they accompanied the family through different classrooms. In another school, interpreters wore fluoro jackets so parents and teachers could recognise them and call on them as needed. It is pointless to hold a parent/teacher interview without providing interpreters for parents who are unable to understand English.
 6. If the interviews are located throughout the school, interpreters should be provided with an orientation tour prior to the interviews, an explanation of the main aims of the interviews and the report format.
 7. The school monitors the standard of the interpreting to ensure parents and teachers understand each other. If there are difficulties, the school provides feedback to the interpreter booking service so that improvements can be made.

8. The school briefs the MEA to support both parents and teachers at the interviews. Teachers may need advice on whether parents understand what they are saying, where parents are reluctant to admit that explanations are unclear. In addition to an interpreter, the MEA may advise parents on school terminology, where teachers are located, which subjects their child is studying, and which teachers they should see.
9. The school prepares a map for parents and interpreters, showing by name where teachers are located.

c) Making parents feel comfortable at parent/teacher interviews

Parents' lack of familiarity with the school system may result in a lack of confidence when attending the school and participating in the parent/teacher interviews. It is important that the school makes parents feel welcome and that the interviews are well organised. The following is a summary of the steps that were most successful in making the target groups in the REAL Project feel comfortable:

1. Parents who are unfamiliar with the educational setting may be anxious about meeting teachers at the parent/teacher interviews. Schools could encourage informal interactions at a casual social gathering before the more formal parent/teacher interviews. This increases parents' confidence to approach and speak with teachers.
2. Parents understand what is involved in a parent/teacher interview, having participated in a comprehensive information session prior to the appointment.
3. The principal welcomes parents in the foyer, along with an interpreter, and tells the parents where their interviews are located. Signage and maps are useful, but it is important that the MEA is at hand for those parents who do not read.
4. Staff photographs, names and subject details are displayed on the wall of each room used for parent/teacher interviews.
5. Where possible, parent/teacher interviews are held in one building to avoid confusion.
6. The atmosphere is calm and unhurried. Using an interpreter limits conversation time, and a school allocates at least 10–15 minutes for discussions with each teacher. If this time is insufficient, parents are offered an individual appointment at a later date, with an interpreter if necessary.

d) Including students in parent/teacher interviews

The school encourages students to accompany parents to the parent/teacher interview for a number of reasons:

1. The presence of their child helps familiarise parents with the school layout and teachers.
2. The child hears firsthand what the teacher is saying to the parent, resulting in an appreciation of the partnership between parents and teachers. When the parent follows up with support at home, the child knows the parent is working closely with the teacher towards their progress. It is important to note that the child does not have a role as interpreter in the parent/teacher interview.
3. The child is less likely to misrepresent the teacher's instructions if the child knows that parents and teachers are communicating.

e) Following up on parent/teacher interviews

These are practices that were most successful in following up on the target groups in the REAL Project after the parent/teacher interviews:

1. The school keeps track of parents who do not attend the parent/teacher interview, and the MEA contacts them to arrange an individual appointment.
2. The school tells parents that they can make a further appointment with a teacher if their concerns cannot be addressed in the parent/teacher interview. If required, an interpreter is booked for this meeting.
3. The school keeps a record of the sorts of questions parents ask at parent/ teacher interviews in order to organise interpreted information sessions on those topics.

f) School success stories

- One REAL school achieved 100% turnout of parents from its target group. To make parent/teacher interview appointments, the MEA contacted every family by telephone, sitting alongside a teacher who used the online booking system. A translated confirmation of the appointment time was provided to parents the next day and parents received a telephone reminder from the MEA on the day of the interview. Schools need to support parents in the use of the online booking system and making computers and help available for them at the school at a pre-arranged time
- Schools use innovative ways of contacting parents, such as SMS Viber group messages, a fridge calendar of important dates, a phone line with information and audio files on the school website. Schools could also consider introducing a translating app for downloading by parents. One school in the REAL Project has a password-protected parent portal on its website. This provides information about the child's progress, and community languages are being introduced to the site.

5. EQUIPPING PARENTS TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN

Parent advisers in the REAL Project identified four areas in which they wanted to better support their children in the Australian education context. In all schools, parents stated ways of managing children's behaviour was significantly different in home countries. Parents expressed the need to understand career options in Australia, when their own families had often followed traditional family routes with little choice. Parents also realised that schools expected children to be given help with their studies at home, and this again differed from home countries. Finally, parents were unsure of school facilities and practices, and were keen to see schools in action.

MANAGING BEHAVIOUR

Parent advisers in the REAL Project spoke about discipline they experienced in their home countries, where there was physical punishment for misbehaving or failing at school. Advisers felt uncertain that their children would develop good values without such discipline. They were disturbed by Australian laws that prevent physical discipline, and consequently the way children's behaviour is managed in schools. The advisory group at one REAL secondary school discussed ways of managing children's behaviour in the Australian context, based on the school's restorative justice approach. They planned for an information session on this topic, which was attended by a large number of parents from their community. The following is a summary of parents' discussions and the school presentation.

a) Managing behaviour at home

Parent advisers appreciated that there are different rules for disciplining children in Australia compared to their home countries and that rules apply to both teachers and parents. They were apprehensive about the legal implications of physically disciplining their children, perhaps best summarised by one of the parents from a refugee background. In talking about managing children's behaviour, he said:

There's quite a big cultural roadblock for refugee parents. Back home, children are able to be disciplined with a stick or cane and when we come to Australia we can't do this. Children take on a different attitude, and it's hard to keep them on a straight road without being able to discipline them with a stick. I've heard of many cases where parents are asked to go to court because their children have told an authority figure about being hit. So parents have to be disciplined for disciplining! It's become a big boulder between parents and children that parents cannot use the method their parents used to keep their children straight. I understand there are some children who can be disciplined verbally, but others have to be given more forceful discipline. If I let my children be raised in the Australian way, the children may become Australian and may take a path that makes them become a threat to the family and the whole of society. Then everyone will look at the parents and ask why they didn't do anything. I don't want to be in that position. It should be the parent's right to be able to discipline children and express themselves about raising children in a country where culture and law and society values are so different.

One primary school responded to fears expressed by advisers by explaining the processes followed by the Victorian Child Protection Service. Parents were assured that the services primarily focused on support for the family, with court proceedings only being pursued in serious cases of abuse.

b) Managing behaviour at school

The secondary school that took a restorative justice approach to managing student behaviour provided a detailed explanation of school processes for parents from refugee backgrounds. The concept was new to them and they initially had difficulty believing that children would respond to a disciplinary process that did not include physical punishment. They first had to be convinced that this approach benefited children because they learnt a model of negotiation rather than aggressive behaviour.

Because restorative justice practices depend on a process of speaking with students, advisers expressed a fear that children from refugee backgrounds may experience discrimination when, for example, teachers punish students for fighting. Their children may have been bullied and discriminated against by other students, but their cultural reticence or inability to explain themselves in English may result in teachers not hearing the full story. As a result, parents believe their children may be punished unfairly, but neither parent nor child feels they can challenge someone in authority.

The school's presentation on restorative justice was clear and visual, and was interpreted. It focused on the big picture, considering the welfare of the child and how restorative justice practices fit within this. REAL advisers felt that the topic of managing children's behaviour was of much interest and importance to parents in their community and an information session should be held once or twice a year. This should be promoted by the MEA, with translated notes sent home and translated items in the newsletter. They suggested key points for inclusion in the information session:

- School discipline is bound by Australian laws that prevent physical punishment. When physical punishment is used, children learn to take an aggressive approach.
- Bullying is repeated violence against a student, be it verbal, physical, cyber or by exclusion.
- Restorative justice is a process that asks children to think about the effects they are having on other people and an opportunity for them to change their behaviour with support from the school. Students are brought together to speak about an incident, with the student who has been hurt having the opportunity to tell the other student about the impact of their action. This is done in a safe and supportive environment that seeks to resolve differences.
- School processes for addressing bullying involve speaking with the students who are bullying and being bullied, and if bullying persists, the perpetrator is referred to welfare staff and a principal.
- The problem is identified through discussions between students, a teacher, and a principal. All parties are able to state their part in the conflict and agreements are made to improve behaviour. Consequences may be proposed at this stage, including such actions as writing an apology letter, or staying in at recess or lunch. If bullying and conflict persists, consequences may be more severe, such as after-school detention, or internal expulsion, where the student is isolated from others. In rare cases, a student may be suspended and DEECD advised. If there are repeated suspensions, a student may be expelled, although this is a last resort.
- Information about bullying is provided to all students throughout their school life, including in units of work, information sessions, external speakers, and art activities.
- Teachers monitor bullying, including in classrooms and yards.
- Parents should speak to the school if they believe their child is being bullied. They should speak with the welfare teacher, requesting the presence of the MEA or an interpreter.
- There are processes for informing parents about cases of bullying or poor behaviour that are referred to a principal. Parents may receive a letter or be invited to be present in discussions between teachers and students. When a child makes a mistake, the school does not regard this as a parent's mistake, and the family should not feel shame.

Parents felt that information provided on bullying and restorative justice processes not only benefited their children, but also provided parents with pointers to raising children in Australia. They learnt new techniques for managing children's behaviour and the need to be patient and maintain control.

Advisers felt that schools should provide a translated explanation of their approach to bullying and restorative justice. They were also keen to support the school's position if a student was sent home. They were concerned that students might enjoy being excluded from school, and felt that parents should be advised of ways to enforce the school's punishment. They suggested, for example, that the child might be grounded, banned from using technology or forced to do homework.

Parents' understanding of the restorative justice process was helped by examples of real stories of students at the school, for example:

A boy approached a teacher to report that a girl was continually calling him names, was laughing at him and making him feel bad. It had happened on many occasions and he was annoyed and frustrated and wanted some help. The teacher spoke to the girl to see if she was willing to fix it. After she'd agreed, the teacher brought the students together and both had a chance to talk. The girl was asked questions such as, 'When you did this, how do you think the boy felt?' The girl replied he would have been angry and annoyed. When the boy was asked how it had affected him he said he was not only hurt and angry but embarrassed in front of everyone. The discussion gave him power to talk about it and get the girl to hear. The agreement that was written up had five points for the girl to follow, for example: 'We will not make jokes about this person'. When it was checked after time, four of five points had improved, though the girl was still teasing him. For breaking that part of the agreement the girl got detention, and this was followed up with another meeting to see how the agreement was going. The girl thought the process was fair and that there was a big improvement, and she knows the school is watching.

SUPPORTING CAREER CHOICES

Advisory groups in the two secondary schools in the REAL Project discussed career options, career pathways, VCE and VCAL, and school subjects. Parents were keen to support their children in making career choices by providing advice and supporting their child's decision. Parents encouraged their children to discuss career options with teachers and children relied on the school's advice. Parents felt it was important that children took their own interests into account rather than their parents' aspirations.

Schools have strategies to provide comprehensive information about career pathways, and Career Conversations⁷ is suggested as a useful online resource to help parents discuss careers with their children. However, parents from refugee backgrounds have difficulty accessing such information because of language barriers and their lack of familiarity with Australian career options. The logistics of managing interpreters at careers information sessions is a challenge for schools, but parents may fail to understand career presentations when information is not interpreted. Advisory groups considered these issues and suggested school practices that would improve access to information and increase parents' knowledge of career pathways. The following is a summary of suggestions to maximise parents' participation in supporting their children to make career and pathway choices.

a) Accessing careers information

Schools provide information on careers and career pathways to both students and parents from early in a student's schooling. One REAL P-12 school organises a Grade 5 careers information day involving students from other local schools and including parents. Job options are presented by representatives from the police, fire brigade, nursing and trades areas. Many schools have managed individual pathways (MIP) programs, applied from Year 7, when students are asked to think about their strengths and weaknesses in a general way. They are given an idea of broad options for future pathways. Career choices are taken up in earnest in Year 10, and there are parent information sessions on VCE/VCAL and subject choices. Parents are also allocated a staff contact and interviewed individually with their children.

REAL advisers who attended career information sessions in the past found them confusing. Interpreters were not always provided, and when available, the standard of interpreting was found lacking because of the complexity of the information. Careers information is complex for most parents to understand, and clear communication is critical to providing the information to parents from refugee backgrounds. REAL schools appreciate the need for interpreters, but identify barriers to their use. Careers presentations tend to be dense and schedules are tight. There is little opportunity to pause for interpreters and interpreting is a distraction for those who speak English. Advisory groups provided some options to overcome these issues:

⁷ www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/beyond/Pages/conversation.aspx

- Organise information sessions with interpreters for non-English-speaking parents. This might be on the same or different nights to the English presentation.
- Train a teacher who speaks the language of parents (if available) to deliver the careers information, assisted by the multicultural education aide (MEA).
- If the school is only able to manage one careers session for all parents, allow for interpreting pauses in the presentation. Alternatively, employ interpreters who are able to interpret simultaneously and position them with their language group in a room with audio-visual access to the English presentation.
- Allocate rooms for different language groups, provide interpreters and rotate subject staff around the rooms to explain pathways related to their subject areas.
- Brief interpreters and MEAs before the session to ensure words and concepts are accurately interpreted.
- Do not use bilingual students as interpreters, as they may not understand the words and concepts, and may bias the information in their preferred direction.
- Make sure the presentation contains clear explanations of key information and support the explanations with visual images, simple diagrams, examples of past students' experiences, and presentations by past students.
- Carefully explain terminology and abbreviations that schools may take for granted, such as pathways, MIPs, vocational education, apprenticeships, VCE, VET, VCAL and TAFE.
- Provide translated handouts of the most important information, such as school expectations of Years 11–12 families.

b) Providing careers information to parents

The career experiences of parents from refugee backgrounds often differ considerably from the choices experienced by their children in Australia. Parents may be unaware of the range of career opportunities presented to their children and the pathways to pursue their chosen career. While explanatory booklets are provided to students, these are in English and often inaccessible to parents. Advisers suggested it would be helpful to translate key information from:

- Job Guide
- A description of the difference between VCE and VCAL
- Course selection handbooks produced by the school

Advisers recommended that parents from refugee backgrounds be provided with accessible information that explains key points about careers, pathways and subject choices. They emphasised it was important to carefully explain:

- How parents can communicate with their children about subject choices to help them make good decisions
- Which subject choices and pathway options result in job opportunities and likely income of those jobs
- Subjects that are available at the school
- Differences between VCE and VCAL, and when VET subjects should be taken
- Pathway options for VCE and VCAL
- The implication of switching between VCE and VCAL

- Certificates received by students for passing VCE and VCAL
- Apprenticeships and work experience
- The processes for applying for TAFE and university
- Potential outcomes of attending TAFE and university
- Subjects required for university, the scoring system and which jobs require a university degree
- Fees for university and TAFE
- Open days for university and TAFE
- Career expos
- Whether children should work after school to earn money when in Years 11 and 12
- How families can support their children in Years 11 and 12. For example, a number of advisers had visitors and expected children to be sociable. This made it difficult for students to complete homework, and they asked for strategies to manage this (e.g. using the library or homework club).
- How families can support their children to find work on completion of their studies

c) Promoting parents' involvement in career information sessions

Parents from refugee backgrounds may be unaware that career information sessions are being held because invitations are sent home in English. Advisers suggested strategies for promoting information sessions.

- The school sends translated invitations to parents as notices, emails and SMS. This may be to attend a careers information session or an individual careers interview with the school. The invitation emphasises the importance of the parents' involvement in their child's career choices and encourages parents to request an interpreter if required
- The MEA reminds parents about career information sessions and is thoroughly briefed in opportunities for parents to be involved in their child's career choices
- The newsletter contains translated invitations to careers information sessions
- Parents receive translated letters advising them of their child's subject choices
- The careers information session is summarised and translated on the school's website
- Course information is translated on the website

HELPING CHILDREN AT HOME

Parents from refugee backgrounds are often uncertain about how they can help with their children's education at home. This idea is unfamiliar to some parents. If a child attended school in their home countries, parents regarded teachers as intellectually superior and solely responsible for the child's education. Throughout the REAL Project, advisers aired concerns that their lack of education, English language and knowledge of the Australian education system prevented them from supporting their children. They did not necessarily understand the homework children brought home, and for this reason felt their children did not value what they said. Parents needed to be convinced that they could help children with their studies and the three primary schools in the REAL Project demonstrated ways to do this. The following is a summary of advisory group discussions on supporting children's education at home.

a) Benefits of helping children at home

Parents appreciated that they could support their children in a number of practical and beneficial ways. These included making sure children got to school on time, preparing their lunch, buying them a uniform, stationery and laptop, providing a quiet study area at home, paying for internet access, taking their children to the local library, encouraging children to attend homework clubs and generally encouraging them to study. They were uncertain what other help they could provide.

Early in the REAL Project, advisory groups discussed research on the benefits of parents' engagement in their children's education. This research had been inaccessible to parents who had spent their lives in war zones and refugee camps. In particular, research which highlighted the benefits to both schools and parents resonated with parents while discussing the notion of partnering with schools and helping children at home. Four key beliefs were discussed:

- All parents have dreams for their children and want the best for them.
- All parents have the capacity to support their children's learning.
- Parents and school staff should be equal partners.
- The responsibility for building partnerships between school and home rests primarily with school staff, especially school leaders.⁸

By debating these statements with school staff, parent advisers began to recognise their capacity to work with the school to help their children's education regardless of their own level of schooling. They appreciated that research suggests that this partnership results in higher educational outcomes for students and that this is particularly beneficial to students from refugee backgrounds with disrupted education.

b) Ways to help children at home

Schools in the REAL Project spoke to parent advisers about what homework children were expected to complete. This clarification was helpful to parents whose children may have told them there was no homework. The advice allowed parents to establish a homework routine. Parents were also advised on how healthy food, sleeping habits and play would benefit their child's concentration at school. Schools emphasised the importance of parents asking how to support their child at parent/teacher interviews, where individual needs could be addressed.

Schools demonstrated fun educational games for parents to play with their children at home, including:

- Bingo to learn numbers
- Rolling dice to add and subtract numbers
- Using playing cards to add and subtract numbers
- Finding matching pairs of words on cards
- Playing 'I-spy' to learn spelling
- Putting frequently used words in order (e.g. alphabetically)
- Tracing letters with coloured pencils
- Singing ABC at normal speed, slowly and quickly to learn alphabet and sounds
- Singing Hokey Pokey to learn right and left and names of body parts
- Playing 'Simon Says' to learn listening skills and names of body parts
- Fishing for the alphabet, using magnets on fishing lines and paper clips on paper fish labelled with the alphabet to learn the alphabet and simple words beginning with those letters
- Selecting a word and looking through a newspaper article for children to compete in finding the word to help reading skills

⁸ Henderson and Mapp (2010) www.wafamilyengagement.org/articles/bake-sale.html

In addition to playing these games with their children, parents were encouraged to consider other strategies such as:

- Creating a shoe box of practical tools for a child to complete homework (containing, for example, pencils, ruler, eraser, dictionary, calculator, textas, word lists and school timetable). It was suggested that each child in the family should have their own box, labelled with their name and decorated by the child. Opening the box at homework time helps a child to maintain a routine and unfinished homework can be kept in the box. Other children in the family can be warned off opening the box so that it becomes personal and special to the child. If a child does well at school, a parent might put a surprise treat in the box.
- Reading with a child, even if the parent does not speak or read English. The parents might tell a story around the pictures in the book or get the child to provide their own interpretation of the pictures.
- Setting aside time to talk to the child, particularly when they are young, using exciting and interesting words. This might include discussing something that a child has watched on TV.
- Participating in school programs to encourage reading.
- Using everyday activities to educate children such as counting when supermarket shopping or weighing when making a cake.
- Making use of a translated booklet on how to help children read. One school translated such a booklet into Chin language, which gave advice on what questions to ask a child, whether or not the parent can understand the book the child is reading. Suggested questions were:

Before reading the book

What is the name of this book?

Is it fiction or non-fiction?

What could this book be about?

What do you know about this book?

What are some words you might find in the story?

While reading the book

Have you looked at the pictures?

Make a picture about the story in your mind

Are you thinking about the different sounds in difficult words?

Can you say that sentence again in your own words?

What happened on that page?

After reading the book

Did you learn anything new?

What would have happened if...?

Can you tell me what happened in correct order?

What was the most important part of this story?

In one school, advisers were unconvinced that many parents would attend an information session on how to help their child at home. They suggested that the school should conduct a cooking class with an Australian recipe, and provide advice on helping children at home during breaks in the cooking. The school discussed the session at a staff meeting, and teachers volunteered to attend and explain how parents can help with different subject areas. The session was successful in attracting parents, and they learnt techniques to help their children. Learning a healthy Australian recipe also helped parents to meet some children's requests for 'Aussie food'.

Another school provides a DVD to Prep parents with a recording of the sounds of words and the ways to write as taught by the school so a parent can support a child to start accurately.

c) Encouraging parents to help children at home

REAL advisers felt that parents in their community may need convincing of the value of helping their children at home, and suggested conducting information sessions on this topic. These sessions would promote the benefits of helping children, school expectations and techniques for parents to use. Sessions would be promoted through the MEA, translated notes home, translated items in the newsletter and through advisers explaining the concepts to other community members.

SCHOOL TOURS

Parent advisers were taken on a tour of four of the schools in the REAL Project to familiarise them with school facilities and practices. Typically schools conduct regular tours for parents throughout the year, particularly at Prep and Year 7 orientation. Parents were surprised and pleased at the extent of school buildings, resources and opportunities provided to the students and felt that school tours should be made available to all parents.

The following is a summary of what made school tours successful for parent advisers.

Participating in a REAL school tour provided parents with an important opportunity to get to know the school and also to observe and ask questions about teaching techniques and classroom behaviour in Australia. They observed marked differences between their children's Australian school and their own experiences in their home country. The tour prompted a group of advisers to comment on those differences. In their home country, classes may have up to 70 students with one teacher. If a student fails an exam, they must repeat a year until they succeed, rather than receiving additional help. All groups commented on the differences in discipline, being most familiar with physical discipline in their own education.

Some key strategies that made school tours successful were:

- A translated flyer promoting tours was circulated to parents.
- The tour took in the whole school and moved through classrooms while lessons were being conducted.
- A teacher provided an interpreted explanation of school facilities and programs on the tour.
- The MEA accompanied the tour.
- The teacher leading the tour explained classroom activities, and teaching and learning strategies. For example, in one school, adviser parents asked for an explanation of the blog in the Prep class and a follow-up session was dedicated to observing the children's use of it. In another, anti-bullying posters were explained, prompting parents to request information on the school's approach to bullying and discipline.
- Parents were introduced to reception staff.
- Parents were shown the sick bay and there was an explanation of the procedure for caring for sick children.
- Gender-segregated toilet arrangements and procedures were explained.
- Parents were told of safety arrangements for recreational areas, such as yard duty teachers.
- There was information on education aides and how they help children.
- There was information on programs and special classes.

- There was information on the school's approach to religion and cultural differences (e.g. halal food, dress code).
- Parents were prompted to reflect on what they were seeing on the tour. One school conducted a quiz following the tour. Another school proposed two questions for parents to consider while moving through the school: What are the students doing? What is the teacher doing?

One school suggested that advisers be trained to conduct school tours with their community in future.

LEARNING WALKS

One secondary school advisory group discussed parents' contribution to the school by including them in a learning walk. This allowed advisers to observe and comment on classroom practices that were very different to those experienced in their own country. Their feedback was subsequently provided to teachers via the school leadership. The following is a summary of the advisers' experiences of contributing to the school's practices and children's education by participating in a learning walk.

a) The school explains learning walks

Not all schools have adopted the practice of learning walks, and this description may assist schools to consider the practice. The description also summarises points that are important to include in a briefing for parents from refugee backgrounds. The summary reflects information that was provided to advisers, but further details of learning walks may be of interest to schools.⁹

Learning walks were introduced to the REAL secondary school some years ago, following leadership advice from Professor Richard Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Learning walks provide for professional development through direct observation and teacher support in the classroom. Teachers are briefed on the program's aims and objectives and become used to their peers entering their classroom unannounced to observe students' learning. Even if the principal and outside observers enter the classroom, teachers do not pause or feel intimidated but see it as an opportunity for feedback and professional development. The school has developed evaluation measures to know how the students are learning, and observers ask specific questions to address the evaluation measures. Questions are addressed to the observers themselves, rather than to students or teachers.

Peer observations were initially established within the school and there have also been learning walks for senior students. Observation groups compare notes after being in the classroom and provide feedback to the school's leadership team for discussion among staff. From early learning walks, the school recognised that they had to be explicit about what they were teaching. As a result, learning intentions are written on the board at the start of every class, along with tasks and outcome measures. These were demonstrated to advisers in the REAL Project.

In briefing REAL advisers, the school gave examples of learning walks undertaken by students. For example, the principal and some students walked around the yard and observed what was happening at recess in the play areas to assess whether the environment was meeting student needs. School staff observed classes to try and understand why girls were not taking up maths and science. The school has also conducted learning walks with school council and parent groups.

Advisers were invited to participate in a learning walk and were advised to:

- Develop evaluation questions for one clear topic
- Answer only the evaluation questions they developed, rather than commenting on other aspects of the classroom
- Observe the classroom and think about the questions, rather than interacting with students or teachers.

⁹ For example, in Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *Looking at Classroom Practice*, 2014, pp. 48–49
www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/classroom-practice/looking_at_classroom_practice_interactive.pdf

The advisers considered topics that they could observe, taking into account that some had limited English language abilities. They felt they could observe:

- Students' general engagement in classroom activities
- Students' interaction in the classroom
- Students' active engagement in work
- Students' relationship with the teacher
- The amount of talking by students and teachers
- Whether the classroom environment is calm and orderly
- What visual aides are in the classroom
- Whether students are attentive
- What the students' work habits are
- How children sit in the classroom
- What technology is used
- How wall displays are used in education

Advisers participated in an initial learning walk by observing how questions are handled in the classroom. They decided to observe:

- If the teacher is asking questions, are both boys and girls answering them?
- If the teacher is asking questions, how long is the teacher waiting for students to give an answer?
- If the teacher is asking questions, is he/she asking the whole class generally or asking individual students to answer?

Advisers observed practices in a number of classrooms and the group provided feedback to the principal. This was shared with the school's leadership team to consider for professional development. In addition to contributing to school practices, advisers observed how children learn in Australian schools.

b) Overcoming barriers to participation in learning walks

Advisers recognised a number of barriers to participating in learning walks. They felt it would be difficult to understand classroom discussions because of their lack of English. As a result, they proposed that observations be limited to visual rather than verbal interactions. They also felt that large groups of parents would be disruptive to classes, and suggested that there be small groups only, with a comprehensive briefing on behaviour to ensure parents did not disrupt classes.

c) Promoting parents' participation in learning walks

The advisory group discussed how to encourage parents from refugee backgrounds to be involved in learning walks. Ideas included:

- Presenting an interpreted information session is considered necessary for parents to understand the aims of learning walks
- Translated invitations to an information session to be sent to parents from refugee backgrounds
- Consultation with parents as to what they would like to observe on a learning walk (with interpreter)
- Brainstorming of questions for observers participating in a learning walk (with interpreter)
- Interpreted session for feeding back observations to the principal and/or other members of the school leadership team

6. TRANSITION

Advisory groups in three schools in the REAL Project discussed transition into and out of primary school. They were excited that their children were to receive education when it had been unavailable to parents but also felt apprehensive for their child: Would the child be able to understand what the teacher said? Would the child be safe in the school environment? Would the child be happy? The schools talked about processes for enrolling in Prep, enrolling in a later year level from an English language school, and transitioning to secondary school. Parents from refugee backgrounds had managed to enrol their children in school but were often confused about processes and unable to complete the necessary forms without help. In some instances, Prep children missed orientation programs because enrolments were not completed in time. Where information was available, it was often in English and advisers agreed that more information was required by parents in their communities. The following is a summary of parents' discussions and information provided to them by schools.

PREPARING FOR PREP

a) Parents' knowledge of enrolment and transition processes

If their children attended kindergarten, parents gained knowledge of how to enrol in Prep from kindergarten teachers. In some cases, schools outreach to kindergartens and the MEA explains enrolment processes. Otherwise, parents gain knowledge from community contacts. In this case, they may not appreciate timelines or receive details of orientation programs for both children and parents. Parents may be unaware that they can enrol their child at any time in the year preceding their entry into school. Because of this, some children enrolled late, missed transition and orientation programs, and were unprepared for school.

Enrolment forms may be difficult to complete without help, because of language or literacy issues. Parent advisers saw the MEA as being invaluable in assisting them to complete forms. They also recognised that the MEA knew most members of their community and felt that the MEA should contact families when children were reaching school age.

One outcome of the information provided to parents in the REAL program was that they learnt what sort of questions to ask at a new school, such as special support provided to children with limited English or interrupted schooling. Parents felt reassured by the information, particularly when they heard about the orientation programs for their children.

b) Schools' advice to parents

Schools explained enrolment based on the different situations a child might be in. A student may join a primary school from a kindergarten, from another Victorian school, from an English language school, from interstate or overseas. Kindergartens, other schools and English language schools provide a report on the child to the primary school and there may be contact between teachers. On enrolment, families are assessed for their needs (such as links to playgroup or their ethnic community) and children's year levels are assessed if coming from interstate or overseas. The MEA is involved in enrolments to give advice to parents, but also to assist the school to understand the needs of the child and family. Birth certificates and immunisation records are checked for those coming from interstate or overseas, although one school commented that birth certificates may not reflect the real age of the child and the MEA is able to work this out with parents.

Children joining the school on arrival from overseas often need additional support to engage in an educational setting in Australia. Schools check children's age and their previous schooling to determine the level of support the school should provide. Children with disrupted schooling are supported by personalised learning.

All REAL primary schools held orientation programs for parents and children joining Prep. Parents were provided with orientation dates in translated notes and the MEA reminded parents. Sessions were supported by MEAs and interpreters. Parents accompanied children to their orientation sessions, and once the children were settled parents were invited into the staff room.

Orientation topics and processes varied from school to school, but key points for parents included:

- Practical details, such as school hours, school expectations, fees, breakfast club, breaks, uniforms, and teachers
- A school tour, including observation of classrooms
- Introduction to the principal, Prep teachers and other school staff
- An overview of classroom activities and advice on how to support children's reading at home
- Advice on school programs, such as homework club
- Advice on homework and how to support learning at home
- Advice on healthy eating habits, including about culturally appropriate food for lunch boxes
- Advice on healthy sleeping habits so children are not tired at school. Many of the children of refugee parents in the REAL Project stayed up late eating and socialising as part of the family
- Advice on the learning to be gained from play, and encouragement for children to be allowed to play at home
- An invitation to meet with teachers whenever parents feel uncertain about school processes or practices

One school holds enrolment information sessions for parents from refugee backgrounds with the assistance of the MEA. Parents are given assistance to complete forms, which may be submitted at the session. The information session might also elicit questions that parents may be reluctant to ask, such as special programs that might support children.

Another school contacts the local English language school half way through each term to ask whether any children plan to enrol in the primary school in the following term. Families of transitioning children are invited to the school to complete enrolment forms and there is also a day when the child and parents come to the school before they start, when practical information is provided. On this day, the school also finds out about the child's interests and talks about the family's background so the school knows how to best meet the child's needs. Parents are often very nervous when they come to the school, and the MEA's support role is introduced to them.

Another school holds a Prep family day shortly after the start of the school year, which helps parents to get to know other parents and teachers in a fun atmosphere. There is entertainment and games for children as well as adults, and families are encouraged to bring a picnic.

PREPARING FOR YEAR 7

Primary schools provide forms for enrolment at secondary schools. Parent advisers felt that secondary school forms are too difficult to complete without help, but that less help is available from secondary schools than in primary schools. Schools in the REAL Project responded to this in a number of ways.

- Primary schools provide a calendar of secondary school open day dates and recommend that parents attend to help them choose the school they prefer.
- Primary schools help parents to complete the secondary school forms.
- One primary school negotiated with a local secondary school to share the same MEA, so that she could advise parents on transition between the schools.
- One primary school responded to parents' difficulties in understanding what books and uniform to purchase and where to buy them by liaising with the secondary school to organise a bus outing with the MEA to book, stationery and uniform shops.
- One primary school liaised with the secondary school to organise a tour of the school with an MEA to address parents' fear for their children's safety in the bigger school.
- Primary schools reminded parents that they could request an interpreter be present when speaking with staff at a secondary school. Parents expressed a concern that secondary schools were larger and more impersonal and they were nervous of approaching teachers.
- One primary school invited representatives from the secondary school to meet with parents and introduce them to the enrolment pack and help complete forms. Parents were briefed about enrolment and orientation processes.
- One primary school held a significant graduation event for students transitioning to Year 7, including dinner with the principal and farewell speeches. This helped to provide 'closure' to the Year 6 students.

Students themselves attended local secondary schools for orientation days and primary schools provided individual reports on children to the secondary school. It was reassuring for parents to be told about orientation processes for their children.

Parent advisers felt it was important for schools to hold annual information sessions on enrolment and orientation for both primary and secondary schools. They felt the sessions should reflect the information provided in the REAL program as outlined above. Sessions should be supported by MEAs and interpreters and translated invitations should be sent to parents. Schools may have difficulty identifying parents whose children may have 'slipped through the net' (by not attending kindergarten or an English language school), but it was suggested that the MEA knows their community well and should be proactive in identifying children of school age.

Information and orientation sessions are well attended and successful when:

- A translated invitation is sent to parents and the MEA verbally reminds parents of the event (by phone or when seeing them at school or in the community).
- A translated item appears in the school newsletter.
- A translated invitation is displayed on a banner or noticeboard in the school reception.
- Students are asked to tell their parents about the session.
- School staff check enrolment data to identify anyone who may have recently arrived and who may have missed promotional material.

- The MEA asks around in the community to make sure that all school age children are enrolled in school and makes parents aware of enrolment and orientation processes.
- Community leaders are provided with accurate information about enrolment and orientation processes and asked to spread the word in their community.
- Interpreters are available.
- Sessions begin at the start of the school day, so parents can stay on for orientation after dropping off their children.
- School staff greet parents who are dropping off children to encourage them to attend the session, even if for a short time.
- Refreshments are provided and it is a social occasion.
- Topics covered in the orientation address issues that are important to parents (practical information and reassurance about the safety and happiness of children).
- Older children of the same language might be included in the information session to give their perspective on school practices.

7. CONTRIBUTING TO THE SCHOOL

One secondary school advisory group discussed parents' contribution to the school through focus groups and school council. Participation in these strategies provided an opportunity for parents to understand and be a part of the school's governance. Other REAL schools provided information about school council to advisers. Parents from refugee backgrounds are generally unfamiliar with the Australian education system. They come from countries where parents may be 'hands off' in their children's schooling due to cultural norms. It is therefore important for schools to familiarise parents not only with the education system, but also with parents' role in the governance of schools. In one secondary school, advisers heard for the first time that they could nominate for the school council or provide input to focus groups that advise school council. Following an explanation of focus groups and school council, all advisers attended a focus group and one attended school council.

In the REAL primary schools, there was discussion on contributing to the school by helping in classrooms. This section summarises some advisers' first experiences of the governance structure and others' experiences of helping in the classroom.

SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

The REAL schools' explanation of the governance structure included the following points, which are important to include in a briefing for parents from refugee backgrounds:

a) School council

- All parents may nominate for school council, regardless of whether they speak English.
- Parents nominate for school council, after which there is an election.
- The primary focus of the school council is to assist the principal in making major decisions and managing school finances. The council also considers school policies and renews the principal's position if required.
- The school council meets regularly to an agreed schedule.
- Only members of the school council can vote but other parents are welcome to observe school council meetings.
- Parents benefit from contributing to the children's education through the school council and children benefit from their input.

b) Focus groups

- All parents may join a focus group.
- Focus groups meet before school council meetings and dinner is provided between the two meetings.
- Focus groups differ from volunteer roles in the school, in that they contribute to the management of areas that are important to the school. Focus groups give parents a voice in the running of the school.
- Focus groups discuss selected areas of school governance to provide advice to the school council. Areas might include such topics as finances, fundraising, the school environment, literacy and numeracy practices.
- A focus group initially receives an explanation of what is currently happening in the school in a particular topic area and parents are invited to provide feedback to guide the focus group's approach to school council.

c) Overcoming barriers to participation in school governance

After trialling an adviser's participation in the school council, the school was able to identify logistical barriers that could be overcome. Issues included:

- The school council is held in a small board room and the sound of the interpreter is disruptive for other members. The need to pause for interpreting is also distracting for discussions and may be frustrating for other members.
- Questions posed by non-English-speaking parents need to be interpreted and this disrupts the flow of conversations.
- Briefing papers are provided to school council members in English and are often technical and complicated.
- Parents from refugee backgrounds may not have experienced formal meetings and lack confidence in that setting.

The school proposed a number of solutions, although it was recognised that these require patience from English-speaking school council members:

- The school council is relocated from the board room into a larger space to accommodate the interpreter.
- The non-English-speaking parent on the school council has an earpiece that is electronically connected to the interpreter who listens to the meeting from a discreet corner of the room or one that is adjacent.
- All school council members have earpieces so that they can tune in to questions from non-English-speaking parents with the help of an interpreter.
- Briefing papers are summarised and translated.
- Parents from refugee backgrounds are provided with a comprehensive orientation to school council meetings, supported by the MEA.
- Parents from refugee backgrounds are provided with a 'buddy' who supports them in school council processes.
- The school council meeting is held in a large auditorium if parents from refugee backgrounds want to observe the meeting. This allows them to be positioned at a distance with simultaneous interpretation so that council discussions are not interrupted.

d) Promoting parents' participation in school governance

The advisory group discussed how to encourage parents from refugee backgrounds to be involved in focus groups and the school council. There were concerns that the language barrier and lack of confidence would prevent parents' contribution and suggestions were made to overcome these issues:

- The school provides an information session for parents from refugee backgrounds explaining parents' involvement in school governance.
- A translated invitation to observe or participate in focus groups and school council is sent to all parents with a tick-box to request an interpreter if required.
- Interpreters are available for information sessions, focus groups and school council.

CLASSROOM HELPERS

Advisory groups in two of the primary schools in the REAL Project discussed parents helping in the classroom as a way of contributing to the school. This form of engagement with the school was considered beneficial to the child, the parent and the classroom teacher. Following discussions, advisory group parents helped in classrooms for the first time, some being in their child's classroom and others in classes that did not include their child. The following is a summary of practices that maximised parents' participation in the classroom.

a) Benefits of parents helping in the classroom

Advisory groups identified a range of benefits for the student, the teacher and the parent when a parent helps in the classroom. Participation by parents from refugee backgrounds brought the added benefit of a language shared with a number of children in the class. Positive outcomes that were identified included:

- Children appreciate that their parents and other community members are interested in their education and this motivates and encourages them.
- When children from refugee backgrounds first join a school they may be unable to speak out and communicate. A child's confidence improves when the classroom helper speaks their language and the child can practice their oral skills.
- Regular attendance by parent helpers builds good relationships with the children who learn to trust them and become more confident.
- Parents are familiarised with the school, its activities and the education system in Australia.
- Parents are able to positively contribute to the education of their own and other children in their community.
- Parents identify the progress of children in their community and can feel pride in their achievements.
- Isolated parents have a reason to leave their house, which encourages their participation in society and contributes to their language skills and confidence.
- Parents are introduced to career options related to child care and education.
- From the classroom, parents learn ways in which they can help their children at home.
- Teachers are assisted by parents, particularly if there are communication difficulties for a child with limited English.

b) Preparing to help in the classroom

Schools in the REAL Project provided information sessions to prepare advisory group members for helping in the classroom. Key elements of the sessions were:

- Demonstrations and descriptions of classroom activities
- Information on Working With Children Checks (WWCC), which are required when helping in a classroom that is not that of the helper's child. REAL advisers were told that the WWCC form can be obtained from a post office and there is no fee for volunteers.
- Identification of parents' skills and interests to assess where best to direct their efforts, e.g. assist with language, art work, story-telling, cooking, gardening, literacy and numeracy
- Information on when to help. It is most helpful to teachers and children if parents can make a regular commitment to helping in the classroom. Parents who are unable to make an ongoing commitment can support more flexible activities. For example, parents might help on excursions particularly where they speak the language of children who have limited English. They might go along to swimming

events to help the teachers. Parents with cooking or gardening skills can contribute their cultural knowledge to these activities

- Strategies for enhancing the confidence of parent helpers, most important being the support of the MEA or a teacher who speaks their language
- Strategies for dealing with helpers' pre-school children

c) Barriers to helping in the classroom

Parents had a number of reservations about helping in the classroom, although in the main these were overcome in the information session and once the parent was in the classroom. In summary, advisers:

- Believed that when they hand their child over to the school it is the school's responsibility to educate the child and there is no place for parents in the classroom. There was a fear of imposing on the teacher's role.
- Lacked confidence because of language barriers and their own limited schooling and qualifications. They felt unable to contribute to classroom activities.
- Felt unable to help in the classroom because they were caring for their pre-school children who would be disruptive. Schools also had work, health and safety concerns about babies and pushers being present in classrooms. There were discussions on how child care might be managed, including by playgroups based at the schools.
- Were sometimes unable to help in the classroom because of employment or their own education commitments.

d) Helping in the classroom

Once advisers had helped in the classroom, they appreciated how useful a parent could be to both children and teacher. The parent's level of English language and education was not an issue for a whole range of classroom activities and a number of parents commented on how much they themselves had learnt from the experience. They recognised their importance in helping children from their community with limited English, particularly in Prep and when children had recently arrived in Australia. In one school, the teacher sent a thank-you note to helpers, which made them feel doubly appreciated.

It was important that activities were initially carefully explained to parents, and the MEA played an important role in ensuring explanations were understood. Activities were tailored to the parents' confidence and abilities, and included:

- Practising the most used one-syllable words in English and comparing sounds with the child's own language
- Learning one letter in the alphabet and using it to start words
- Tracing over alphabet letters in rainbow colours
- Working on reading and spelling words with children by putting them in order, e.g. shortest to longest word, alphabetical order, finding matching pairs
- Talking about a picture in the child's own language
- Taking part in 'discovery play', where children pretend to be in a particular environment (e.g. a hospital) but are unable to communicate with English-speaking children
- Helping a child with their art work
- Helping with jigsaw puzzles and playing cards
- Helping the children in the school's vegetable garden

e) Promoting helping in the classroom

Advisory groups discussed how helping in the classroom might be promoted to their community.

Suggested strategies included:

- Profiling a helper from a refugee background in the school newsletter. The article would tell other parents about their experiences and motivate them to help out. It would demonstrate the benefits of helping in the classroom and how language and educational barriers were unimportant. This article would be translated into the helper's language.
- Regularly appealing in the newsletter in parents' languages
- Sending invitations to parents to help in the classroom, particularly if the invitation comes from the children
- Inviting parents to a morning tea information session about helping in the classroom
- Inviting parents to observe classroom activities and try them out
- Organising a training session on helping in the classroom with the MEA
- Making a video of classroom activities and helpers with a voice-over in parents' languages
- Inviting parents to come with a friend to improve confidence
- Promoting helping in the classroom at all school events attended by parents

QUOTES

Parents and schools made many interesting, informative, passionate, sad and humorous remarks during the course of the REAL Project. These are just a few extracts.

Communication strategies

Parents said:

- The MEA is very important to parents from our community. We see her at all times all over the school. She stands in the corridors when parents drop off children and tells them about programs.
- It's very good to have a relationship with the school. Some children might report what the school says, e.g. there's no homework or I don't have to wear uniform. If you have a good relationship and communication with the school you can check this out.
- Sometimes our children are irresponsible and parents do not know what is happening at school or school doesn't know what's happening at home. It makes children more responsible if they know parents and schools are speaking to each other.
- Sometimes I bring my youngest child to parent/teacher interviews and the teacher talks to them because of the language barrier with me. I think it would be easier for teachers to learn sign language to speak with us!
- Some of the young interpreters at the parent/teacher interview who came to Australia in their teens had insufficient grasp on both our language and on English. They often used 'you know' when they couldn't interpret words, but we didn't know!
- I had a big misunderstanding. My daughter was given a letter to bring home to explain she had to do a reading assignment. I thought they were asking me to teach her to read and that they weren't going to teach her reading at school.

Schools said:

- The MEA is a bridge between parents and school. The community feel they can't approach a teacher directly, but will do so via the MEA. It means the MEA role is very important for the school.
- When a child enrolls in school, the MEA is able to tell me what might impact on the child's learning such as her educational history or the way she speaks – this guides our teaching. Parents feel comfortable to speak to the MEA.
- Our department modifies all the school notes. We just put in the key points and we might individualise the notice for example for appointments. We try to encourage all teachers to do this.
- We didn't use interpreters at the careers day, but we'll book them in future.
- The newsletter is more popular and easier to read when there are lots of photographs, but there are privacy issues. Some students don't want their photo in the newsletter. Some want it in, but parents don't give permission. Sometimes we have to remove a photo if parents request this, which leaves a gap in the newsletter!

Formal and informal interactions between parents and teachers

Parents said:

- We're not sure if we can come to the school if we're not asked to come. Can we come and ask questions? We're concerned because of language barriers – language barriers make us shy and it's hard to ask questions. Parents tend not to ask questions even if invited to do so, it's our culture.
- It encouraged us to trust the school when teachers used to visit the family at home, help them out and socialise.
- It would be good to know the teachers before the parent/teacher interview. We want to know who our child's teacher is. We feel shy when we first meet them and so it's difficult to ask questions. It would be good to introduce teachers at the beginning of the year.
- It was good to go to the Open Night. I could go into my children's classrooms, see their work and meet their teachers.

Schools said:

- Parent/teacher interviews are well attended because we work hard at helping parents to connect to the school community by running lots of activities for them to be involved in. Teachers are always in the yard and corridors in the morning and afternoon talking to parents and making them feel welcome. The more time we give to this, the more comfortable parents feel and more likely to attend interviews. I would summarise all our work as 'relentless pursuit of parental engagement'.

Parent/teacher interviews

Parents said:

- My children have been at the school for two years, and I haven't understood the report before today. Previously, my children just summarised the report for me, but now I can interpret it accurately.
- I was pleased with the questions we prepared at the last REAL meeting. It made me confident to ask questions. I was able to ask what I thought was a difficult question. I asked the teacher what she was planning to do for my child. The teacher explained what she was doing and how this could be supported at home. I wouldn't have thought to ask that question myself, and I was pleased with the outcome. It would be useful for the questions to be made available to all parents, particularly because new parents are confused and shy to ask. The questions would make a useful check list for teachers.
- It allowed us to understand about homework and readers and how often the children get homework.
- I really liked the interview. It benefited both me and my children. My children didn't always bring home books or enough homework, and I told them I would ask their teacher about this. This encouraged and motivated them.
- My children knew I was to meet with their teacher and find out about their attitudes, behaviour, study skills, strengths and weaknesses. This encouraged them to study hard, achieve more, and be more cooperative and obedient. I was also able to speak with the teachers about my children's behaviour at home, so that the school and I can cooperate and work together to educate my children in the most suitable way.
- It's good to know about the child's curriculum and school rules from the interviews so parents can get involved with homework and practice the same rules at home. This means the child can study and listen well at school.
- The teacher told me that my child knows the answer to questions but doesn't put up her hand to answer. As a result, her father was able to explain to her that she should put up her hand if she wants to answer a question.

- When we were told our child was quiet and not playing with other children it allowed us to encourage her to play with others.
- English is a very hard language. You may understand some of it but not all the terminology. It is very important to have an interpreter for a parent/teacher interview because the teacher talks about the progress of your child. It is important to understand every word.

Schools said:

- We could improve our process by asking parents who don't tell us they're not coming WHY they're not. We need to make sure every child brings the form back so we can contact families where a form's not returned to ask if they're coming and if not why not!
- We sent out translated questions to guide parents before the interviews. All staff felt that parents had a new level of confidence at the interviews because they were able to think about questions and answers beforehand. Parents asked many more questions than previously. Interviews were two-way and more equal than in the past.
- The parent/teacher interview invitation could have a list of teachers' names, photos, subjects and where they can be found in the building. Parents could be told in the invitation what subjects their child is studying and which teachers they need to see.

Supporting career choices

Parents said:

- Careers information is new for people from my country because there was no such thing there.
- Students may insufficiently understand the information they receive clearly enough to explain to parents, for which reason interpreters are very important at information sessions.
- All parents should be made aware of the importance of attending careers information sessions. Invitations should be translated and they should be encouraged to attend all information sessions provided for parents.

Schools said:

- One year, a parent brought an interpreter and this was distracting for speakers and other parents.
- It would be too onerous to ask staff to come on different nights to present to different language groups and logistically difficult to have interpreters in the main presentation.
- We've used bilingual students to provide information to parents, but they have insufficient knowledge to explain the issues around careers and subject choices to their parents.
- It's good to see students from refugee backgrounds understanding a range of options that are available, whereas previously boys only talked about being soldiers and girls being nurses.

Helping children at home

Parents said:

- I had a big misunderstanding. My daughter was given a letter to bring home to explain she had to do a reading assignment. I thought they were asking me to teach her to read and that they weren't going to teach her reading at school.
- When children come home with school work, the school assumes that they will receive help from their parents. But we can't do that.

- There is confusion about homework. In my home country there was a different approach – children did not bring work home for parents to do but might have to work by themselves for up to 2 hours. Here there is reading and maths to do at home and children ask parents for help. It is important to have information sessions about homework before a new parent starts at a school so that they understand it.
- The school told us what questions to ask children when they read their reader, like: What have you learnt? What was the story? And now I ask my daughter to tell me the story.
- We played games that could help our children at home. We learnt how to do it and it was very beneficial. We looked at pictures and ways in which children learn the best. We had assumed that it was best for children to learn at school, but coming to meetings taught us that there are many ways for children to learn, not just from teachers.

School tours

Parents said:

- We were unaware that the school had so many facilities and now we appreciate that our children are educated in such a good environment. We have seen what is important to our children's learning. We've seen things entirely new to us. We consider this country is extremely lucky because we didn't have these kinds of facilities.
- It was good to have the tour. All parents should have a tour to get to know the school. It would be good to have a diagram, like a family tree, which will make it easy to explain the school to parents.
- We are always dreaming of going back to school and putting on a school uniform. We are happy and proud for our children that they have such facilities and we'd like them to make the best of it.
- It would be good for all parents to do a tour like the one we've done. It was fantastic. Some parents think the school is not doing enough and children come to school, play and go home. They should have a tour!
- I was very happy when we walked into the classes, especially my son's class. I saw a lot of posters on the wall and different writing. I cannot read but I thought how good it was for the children. It was great for the relationship between me and my son. If I go to the shop he comes with me to help translate. He helps me a lot, we work together. We saw the clay modelling in the classroom and I remembered it was the sort of thing we did back home. I could talk to him about it.

Learning walks

Parents said:

- Teachers spent a lot of time equally with boys and girls, using names, and calling attention.
- There was a boy who mumbled, so the teacher paraphrased the question so he could answer.
- If no one answered the teacher changed the question so that they could understand and she prompted them more.
- The teacher and students were good, the thing is they didn't put up their hand when they wanted to answer, they just answered. That was different!
- The teacher put in effort to help students, more than the students' effort in fact!

A school said:

- It's reassuring to me that if teachers ask a question they allow time for a response because we've spoken among staff about this. The tendency is to step in if the question is not answered. We've talked a lot about paraphrasing. We're promoting it, because English is a target language, so sometimes you have to rephrase what you say, and be tolerant of that. It was good to see that this is being practised. Thank you for feedback and I can share this with staff. (Principal)

Transition

Parents said:

- I was nervous when my child moved to the primary school because it focused on the student's whole education rather than just English as in the English language school she had attended. I was worried that she wouldn't cope, but all was well.
- I found it helpful to attend the orientation program and meet other people. Those relationships are continuing throughout the school years.
- I felt sad when my child moved to secondary college because you look back on the happy memories of primary school.
- There's less support in the secondary school, no MEA, no interpreters. Parents don't know what's happening to their children in secondary school.
- The Prep family day was fun and the activities very good. The children enjoyed it but they also had to use their brains. They socialised with other children and were happy to show parents what they achieved.
- I attended the primary school graduation ceremony. It was very special but also very sad because teachers, children and parents all cried.

Schools said:

- We have a Prep family day. The school aims to build relationships with the family. This is between teachers and parents, students with other students, and students with the teachers. The students see the cordial relationship between parents and teachers and this encourages the student's relationship with teachers. Getting to know teachers also makes parents more relaxed to approach teachers and talk to them in the rest of the year. The Prep family day is designed to make parents feel comfortable and connected and works well.
- If a student from refugee background joins the school in Prep, they can simply join in the class learning. If they join in Grade 1 upwards, the school provides personal English classes with the ESL coordinator, followed by an outreach teacher from English language school in a small group for 6 months, followed by a school supported group and then classroom support. Out of 560 children in the school there are 300 who do extra classes: this might be speech, sounds in words, for reading, writing, or maths. Sometimes the extra classes are for children who are doing really well, and sometimes for those who need more help.

Contributing to the governance structure

Parents said:

- I didn't know about focus groups but would like to contribute if it helps the children.
- It was very beneficial for me to attend the school council because I learnt about the school's finances, the budget and future plans for the school. I was surprised at the cost of electricity for the school and the discussions on possible solar energy were interesting.
- I will go back to school council again as long as an interpreter is available. It is very important that the school hears parents' opinions. Unlike in my country, parents' opinions can be effective in changing regulations in Australia.

Schools said:

- The school is keen to give parents the opportunity of observing school council, with the possibility of joining in the future.

- We want to encourage parents to be involved but we need to make them feel confident enough to participate.
- We have to find a way of getting through the school council agenda while ensuring the meeting is equitable and inclusive.
- My ultimate aim is for the REAL group of advisers to be a voice, to be attached to the school and associated with school council. There's insufficient connection with all the school's communities now that the school is being joined by a lot more Arabic-speaking students and their parents. School committees are not reflective of the growing groups.

Classroom helpers

Parents said:

- It was a fantastic experience because I didn't know how my child performs in the classroom. I helped with reading, and realised how good my daughter was. This was a pleasure to see!
- I don't speak English, but could chat with children who speak my language. I really enjoyed speaking to the children and helping them. They enjoyed it too!
- The children enjoyed having my attention and that I could speak their language.
- I could help with drawing and colouring even though I don't speak English.
- My daughter frequently asks me to come to school and help in the classroom.
- It's deep in our blood that the teacher is up here and we (the parents) are down here and it's not common for teachers and parents to be together like this. There's always a gap between us. But it's great that teachers and parents can be close where there's no gap.
- I myself learnt from helping in the classroom. I learnt how to write 'F' and to recognise words that start with F, such as flower.
- I couldn't understand the words being studied but the children explained them to me and this was beneficial to their own learning as well as mine.
- It was good to see how the children from my community are learning. I saw them learning handwriting and could see their progress.
- I saw how happy the children were to have a parent helping out.
- One of my children will be in Prep next year, and helping in that classroom showed me what to expect and how to prepare.

Schools said:

- It's very useful to have parents helping in the classroom when they speak the same language as children who have no English.
- Children love their parents to help out and this encourages their education.
- The children were so pleased to see the parent in the classroom that they queued up to sit with her.

REAL Project model

Parents said:

- We were blank when we started this program but in each session we learnt new things and it has helped us a lot. We can go to the community and pass on the message and we can help our friends and help our own children.

- I've been involved with this school for 2 years. Since I started this program I've gained self-confidence and feel I know everything about the school. Previously I was anxious and now I don't have this anxiety because I know my daughter is in safe hands and it's a safe place. The principal and teachers are very good, we can't thank them enough. The good thing about this program was the opportunity for us to discuss the problems we had back home and compare it with the information we gained about school here. We realised how lucky our children are to have a school like this.
- I've enjoyed this program and meeting with everyone else. I wasn't close to the school and didn't have contact with it when one of my daughters came here previously. I was disconnected from my daughter's schooling. Now I have another daughter in the school and I know what's going on. It's a completely different experience. I didn't have a relationship with the school before and didn't know about their programs. Now I can facilitate communication with teachers. It was daunting previously because I didn't know what to do and I wasn't able to help my children. The principal, teachers and the school are fantastic, I can't praise them enough. Thank you so much for the money as well. It helped me.
- We've all enjoyed the opportunities and the project has resulted in changes in the school that are improving parent engagement. We've learnt a lot about school policies, the curriculum and school rules and we can share the information with our children. Before REAL, we couldn't express ourselves to teachers but the program has allowed us to share ideas, worries and difficulties and this has been very beneficial.
- We felt the processes put in place this year were successful and should be continued.
- I was very excited and happy to be part of the program because even though I am busy with children at home, it is important for my children's learning environment and my own integration.
- We gained quite an advantage by being involved in the REAL group. We went through reports and how to understand them, we know the school better and feel to have a better relationship with teachers because we know them personally from the meetings.
- Being parents from refugee background we had no knowledge of school and by participating in the group and being part of the discussions and solutions, we feel to be part of the school. The project has been beneficial to children, but it's also been of great benefit to parents.

Schools said:

- From the school's perspective, I've loved spending time and building relationships with the advisers as parents and wonderful women. I've learnt a lot from them. This included information about their country and about our school. I've enjoyed hearing about things that the school is doing well, but also listening to what the advisers think the school could improve. Most importantly, I've enjoyed seeing advisers grow as confident women. I'd like to talk to them about keeping the meetings going next year.
- I've noticed how parents have become confident and involved in the school. Some have spoken at a recent school review. I appreciate everything that parents do to contribute to the school and their children's education.
- I plan to continue with the group formed by REAL. We'll revisit work done this year, monitor progress and look at new topics. That will continue to encourage parents' access to the school. I've allocated a budget for the meetings and I'll be encouraging the group to decide how to spend it.
- I thought that parents were disengaged from school because they did not want to engage. But the reality is that there are barriers and challenges to parents' engagement. As a teacher, I can contribute to how to engage parents. I have to have the right approach.

ABBREVIATIONS

DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
ESL	English as a Second Language
MEA	Multicultural Education Aide
MIP	Managed Individual Pathway
REAL	Relationships to Enhance Accessible Learning
RESP	Refugee Education Support Program
TAFE	Tertiary and Further Education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VFST	The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.
WWCC	Working With Children Check

THANK YOU

This document represents the outcomes of many meetings between parents from refugee backgrounds and school leadership teams. Their contribution to the REAL Project was invaluable and their patience immeasurable. Parents willingly shared their own sometimes difficult educational and life experiences. School teams openly received suggestions for improving school practices and implemented changes. There was a sense of equality and respect between the two groups. Their sustained hard work provides many innovative approaches to parent engagement in schools and we thank them for their dedication and generosity.

We are particularly grateful to the following school leaders from the schools involved in the REAL Project, who have made themselves available for consultation should you wish to further explore aspects of the project.

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NOTES

