

DID YOU KNOW About one-quarter of students enrolled in NSW government schools were born speaking a language other than English. Together, these students speak more than 80 languages.



EDUCATION

Bridging the gap

A high school in Sydney's west is breaking down language and cultural barriers, writes **Emily Dunn**.



When Azada Muradi arrived in Australia in 2005 as an Afghan refugee, her English-language abilities were limited to "yes", "no" and her name. Within weeks of arriving, she was enrolled in the Intensive English Centre at Holroyd High in Sydney's west, one of several NSW government schools offering specialised services to students with English as a second language.

Now 18, Muradi lives with her family in Merrylands. She is studying for her HSC at Holroyd and hopes to study medicine at university.

It is a life she could have only dreamt of in Afghanistan. After fleeing the war, her family spent seven years in Pakistan, where Muradi and her sisters attended school for the first time. "But it was not a good school; as girls, we were treated differently," Muradi says.

The first months in Australia were challenging as she faced language difficulties and cultural differences. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, she had

limited interaction with men outside her family but in Australia, many of her teachers were men. "At first I felt very secluded and isolated," Muradi says. "But the teachers understood our differences."

Confident, articulate and, according to Holroyd principal Dorothy Hoddinott, "smart as a whip", Muradi is among the many success stories of the Intensive English Centre, which includes students who have arrived as refugees from the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Some also attend on day leave from Villawood Detention Centre.

It wasn't always this way. When Hoddinott arrived at the school in 1995, it was known locally as "Import High" and even within the school, discrimination was rife. Hoddinott set about changing things. She introduced a new code of behaviour for students and

Reaping benefits ... (clockwise from main) Azada Muradi and Kai Sam Madua have made great progress at Holroyd High; Nawras Hamodee plans to go to university; teacher Louise Kleinbergs.
Photos: Jon Reid



teachers, based on respect and equality. Rather than cutting back on refugees, she welcomed more. The results speak for themselves. The school may be small – about 500 students in the mainstream school and 180 in the Intensive English Centre – but absenteeism is low and morale is high.

As the proportion of students from refugee backgrounds has risen, so has the proportion going on to university. An average of 45 per cent of graduates go to university, compared with a state average of 30 per cent. Considering almost 90 per cent speak English as a second language and half are former refugees, Holroyd is punching above its weight. "When they get to university they don't just achieve at pass level, they have the aspiration to better themselves," Hoddinott says.

"We don't teach them hope. That comes from the change in circumstance. What we try to teach them is that they have something to contribute."

Before university, however, there is the HSC and before the HSC is the Intensive English Centre.

Newly arrived English-as-a-second-language students attend the centre on the Holroyd campus for an average of four terms. They cover core subjects, including English, mathematics and science, as well as food technology, art, music and computer studies.

Interpreters are available, along with a range of extracurricular services, such as counselling, reading programs, tutoring and introductions to TAFE. On regular excursions, students learn everyday skills, such as using public transport, filling out forms at Medicare or riding an escalator.

A teacher at the centre, Louise Kleinbergs, says most students adapt quickly to school life but many also struggle with past traumatic experiences.

"We try to be sensitive but sometimes you might be reading a passage from a novel and all of a sudden a student has her head on the desk and is crying and it has triggered some memory for them," Kleinbergs says.

When the four terms are finished, students enrol in a mainstream school. As many travel from other areas of Sydney, some choose a school closer to home but many opt to stay at Holroyd.

Nawras Hamodee, 16, is one of those planning to continue at the main campus. She arrived in Australia with her parents and two younger siblings last year. The family left the war in Iraq nine years ago for Syria and spent four years in Indonesia before they were granted refugee status in Australia.

"In Indonesia, we didn't imagine we'd ever come here," Hamodee says. "You are waiting and then it happens and you have a new life in a new country."

After three terms at the centre, Hamodee plans to study engineering at university. She has also completed a TAFE certificate in hairdressing, which she plans to use to support herself while studying.

Of those who arrive as refugees, many belong to families in which the parents have limited literacy skills in either English or their own language. It falls on their children to help them navigate their new life.

Few arrive with both parents and others arrive with little immediate family at all.

Kai Sam Madua came to Australia as a refugee from Sierra Leone in 2008 at the age of 15, accompanied by an aunt. He now lives with his twin brother in Toongabbie. After spending a year in the IEC, both are studying for their HSC at Holroyd. Madua is planning a career in information technology.

Hoddinott says: "At first, the gains may seem small but the fact that you have kids who have been in a refugee camp going to university five years later, the gains are enormous."

FACT FILE

At any time, about 12,000 refugee students are enrolled in NSW government schools. About 1600 enrol each year. They come from a range of countries in Africa, including Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia and Kenya, as well as nations in Asia and the Middle East, in particular Afghanistan and Iraq.

CASE STUDY SCHOOL EXCHANGE PROGRAM

STUDENTS from Holroyd High School are making waves outside their school community. Among the activities offered to refugee students at the centre are exchange programs with schools such as Abbotsleigh on Sydney's north shore.

The program runs for one week each year and allows students from Holroyd to experience a different kind of school life. The Abbotsleigh students gain an insight into the lives of former refugees.

For the many Islamic girls at Holroyd, the Abbotsleigh program also means they can

learn to swim in the school's private indoor aquatic centre.

"Living in Australia, this is a pretty important skill," the headmistress of Abbotsleigh, Judith Poole, says. "These girls realise that and want to be water safe but there are not many women-only swimming pools."

The pool sessions were the initiative of a group of Abbotsleigh students who, after meeting Islamic students from Holroyd through the exchange program six years ago, recognised an important opportunity. They completed a swimming instructor course and

raised funds to pay for buses and swimming costumes for the Holroyd students.

"The girls from Holroyd said they felt comfortable being taught by girls who were the same age as them," Poole says.

What began as a one-off has now evolved into an annual event. By the end of the week the majority of the Holroyd students are water safe, but Poole says the benefits extend beyond that. "The wonderful thing for our students is the relationship that is built up between these two groups of women," she says.

Emily Dunn



Give and take ... Holroyd High School exchange students at Abbotsleigh.