

Multiculturalism in Australia

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Introduction

The topic chosen for this essay is multiculturalism in Australia. To discuss multiculturalism in Australia, the essay is divided into 4 parts. The 1st part constitutes the definition of multiculturalism which includes a brief history, the 2nd part discusses issues and challenges faced by multicultural, multilingual, migrant and refugee families staying in Australia. The 3rd part includes strategies, resources and services that can help migrant families and children access and participate in different educational environments. The definition of multiculturalism and challenges and strategies are discussed in the context of Australia only.

The history of multiculturalism in Australia can be traced back to the year 1947 when the post-world war II reconstruction was going on and the manufacturing industries were picking up pace in development. This period saw immigration programs from Britain, northern and Eastern Europe and southern Europe. The policies of the then Australian government towards the immigrants were focused strictly on racial and cultural integration. The period from 1964 to 1972, witnessed a slowdown in the growth of manufacturing industries, employment shifted from manufacturing to service industries and community services. This period also saw an exodus of immigrants from southern European as well as middle-eastern countries. The government policy was focused on providing English education for children who came from non-English speaking backgrounds. Community organisations that were built by ethnic and migrant people became more active and public than before (Burnet, 2018). The period from 1972 to 1975 saw ethnic pluralism which led to the preservation and respect of different cultural differences. Immigration from other countries slows down and the first concept of multiculturalism was introduced. The years from 1975 to 1983, saw the first concrete initiative in promoting multiculturalism by the Australian government. The government prepared reports on migrant programs and services, cultural pluralism was passed as a policy. The period also saw the introduction of ethnic radio and television. Immigrants originating from South-East Asia begin arrival in Australia. The period from 1983 to 1993 saw various developments such as the revaluation of the multicultural policies. During this period a National Agenda for Multi-Cultural Australia was established. There was a conservative attack on immigration and multiculturalism. As a result, immigration reduced significantly. Multiculturalism witnessed an uncertain future. After the year 1988, almost 40% of all the immigrants that arrived in Australia were born in Asia (Ghosh, 2018). By 1990 multiculturalism as a policy became controversial. The policy framework since then slowly evolved in Australia and the most recent policy is ACT Multicultural Framework and Action Plan 2015–2020 (Love, 2021).

Key issues and challenges

People who are culturally and linguistically different can face difficulties in terms of social and economic inclusion as well as settlement. Some of the issues and challenges faced by migrants and refugee families in contemporary Australia are discussed below.

Finding low-cost accommodation is difficult in Australia because there are too many settlers but too few accommodations. As the investments in social housing are also low, the waitlist is also long. Rents in major cities that have more jobs available and better transportation facility has higher room rent. Due to low income, it becomes virtually impossible to afford such rooms (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 2. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Refugees sometimes are not aware of their rights and responsibilities. For refugees who have spent a considerable amount of time in refugee camps, this problem is more apparent in them. The issue of language barrier comes, when they do not know English and thus becomes harder for them to read and understand the rights and responsibilities. This leads to instances where they get exploited ((Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 2. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Racism and discrimination are still an issue, in Australia, particularly for refugee and migrant families. They can face discrimination based on income, and prejudice against refugees and they can be difficult as tenants (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 2. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Sometimes homelessness becomes a daily affair for refugees. Homelessness does not include only streets in that sense, but also the notion of no primary settlement. Thus sometimes people keep moving from one friend's or relative's house to another one, between refugees, boarding houses and emergency housing (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 2. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

In some cases, people who are arriving in Australia have witnessed persecution in other countries and have fled those places, carrying on mental and emotional baggage. These can affect their health and mental condition in Australia. Due to constant moving between places, nutritional diets are a matter of chance and luck. This affects health in the long run (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 3. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Learning English is already a big challenge for migrants, and refugees who are older and not completely literate in their mother tongue or who are inflicted with disabilities or raising children are affected more when their education is disrupted. This disruption is caused due to social and economical problems they face day in and day out. Thus the longer the disruption period stays, the higher becomes the chance of quitting schools or ongoing classes.

As most of the migrants and refugees come from linguistically different countries and cultures it takes time to learn English. This issue is prolonged when they are going through other sets of problems such as housing or the trauma they faced from past experiences (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 4. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Young people who enrol in schools and the education system sometimes face challenges such as transitioning from a life spent mostly in camps to a more normal easy life. Sometimes they are categorized on basis of age during enrolment and not on basis of education. This creates problems to keep up with fellow students. Sometimes they are pressured to start generating income for their families. Other issues are difficult home environments, discrimination in and

outside school, and under-resourced public schools (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 4. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Those who do not have a working knowledge of English face difficulties to get proper employment. Research shows that income and labour market participation is directly related to proficiency in English. Sometimes employers do not consider overseas work experience as a valid one in Australia. At times it becomes increasingly expensive and impossible to convert overseas work experience into a legally valid experience in Australia. General employment services are not able to find suitable jobs for these people for not being able to meet the basic criteria demanded by such job postings (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 5. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Transportation plays a crucial role in getting people jobs, education and other services. Due to issues with housing affordability, people take homes in outer metropolitan and regional areas. These places sometimes do not have frequent public transport services. To decrease dependency on public transport services, people apply for driver's licenses. Due to limited knowledge of English, people find it difficult to pass driver's license exams. Besides the issue of a driver's license, it sometimes becomes difficult to get a car or other affordable transport vehicles, due to a lack of proper documents (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 6. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Often people arrive with little monetary support or cash at all. Besides that, even those people who have little money available to them, cannot manage them efficiently. This is due to a lack of simple basics of budgeting, contracts, insurance and loans. This in turn causes them to fall into debt traps. These debt traps become means of exploitation by socially and economically privileged people due to a lack of understanding of financial and contractual arrangements by migrant and refugee families. These large financial burdens do not let them use essential services in times of need due to lack of money (Settling in Australia: The challenges – Page 7. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

The complexity of legal processes in Australia and few or no working knowledge of the English language does not let migrant people apply for a visa for their family members, whom they want to bring to Australia. There are no or very few migration agents within the affordable limits of the people, whose legal aid aids can be taken in these cases (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 8. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

An important criterion, as well as the basic needed to hold Australian citizenship, is being able to prove one's identity. Migrant and refugee families living in Australia face issues getting citizenship because their ages are wrongly mentioned in their Visas. This does not let them establish their identity properly. Such mistakes in the visa papers prohibit them to get proper and essential services as there is a mismatch between their actual age and stated age (Settling in Australia: The challenges - Page 10. Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

Suggested strategies

The issues and challenges faced by migrant and refugee families in Australia discussed in the previous section indicate the common root cause in all of them, which is education. Education should be prioritized for every age group starting from childhood to adult people.

Refugee and migrant parents should be made aware of the importance of child education. There are preschools and kindergartens spread across Australia. These schools must guide the parents to understand the type of services offered by schools and ways to provide fees and use subsidies. The local and state governments should provide subsidy plans for refugee families living in remote areas of Australia to finance the education of their children. This subsidy plan will work to take care of two problems, one is regarding monetary support and family pressure. Families and parents will decrease their insistence and pressure on children and young kids to leave education and start working because of such education subsidies.

Schools and educational institutes where people of all ages go should conduct monthly or quarterly awareness programs on racism and discrimination. Besides that, there should be an anonymous reporting system through which incidents of racial abuse and discrimination can be passed through to neutral bodies outside school administration. Based on the credibility of the information received, local neutral bodies can approach the administration of the institute where such incidents took place and mediate between the parties involved.

Instead of categorizing people based on ages, the focus should be on the present educational level in either English or the origin country's language. Once a certain level of homogeneity is reached at the educational level, the people can then be subject to intensive English language coaching programs. This support should be provided in levels of primary schools, high schools and Intensive English Coaching centres primarily in those areas of migrant habitation where the social and economic conditions are poor.

Adults from refugee families who are facing issues regarding job availability should be provided with free apprenticeship programs and vocational and educational training. As pointed before in the previous section that despite having previous work experience, the employer can choose not to recognize such experience. To avoid these, members of the refugee families should approach organisations that recognize such qualifications and skills. The local government should check the parity of such overseas qualifications and experiences with the Australian qualification and experience system.

Families should be educated on proper management and handling of money. To do this community-based education should be started so that people who are already staying in Australia and those who have just arrived can avoid monetary issues in future, with basic knowledge of budgeting, contract signing, insurance, loan terms and conditions in the Australian market. The community teaching programs can be carried out by not for profit or NGOs. The Australian government should incentivize such community teaching programs so that more people come, joins and successfully finishes the programs. Unfinished programs will only lead to loss of time for refugee families and resource wastage for the Australian government. The incentives do not have to bear monetary value or exchange value but they can

be linked to the credit rating system of small banks in Australia. Thus an individual who has properly finished his or her courses as mandated by the government can enjoy a higher credit rating compared to one who is yet to join or has left unfinished in middle. This will thus enforce a sense of maintaining good credit responsibility among refugees and migrants, as they will be aware that the spending and money management choices they take, will shape their future relationship with the banks and credit lending system.

For people facing accommodation issues such as affordability and availability but not homeless and those who are already homeless and are in a direr situation, the approach to include them in the education system should be different. The primary objective should be to provide a seamless method of delivering education without much interference. Keeping this in mind the method of delivering education should be a mixture of online mode and face to face modes. For this reason, the main centres such as boarding houses and emergency housing facilities, where homeless people turn up, other than homes of friends and relatives should be integrated in such a way that irrespective of the location of the homeless people or students, the lesson can be continued from where left and simple tests and exams can be conducted to assess progress. As for those people who cannot turn up in refuge boarding houses or emergency shelters, and are moving from one family or relative home to another home, the availability of social media of all and any kind must be used to create a connected system of education delivery points.

To praise the refugee and migrant families on matters related to rights and responsibilities, the primary focus should be delivering the same through languages that are known or at least partially known to them. Thus instead of waiting for families to get acquainted with colloquial English or English that is used to pen down statutes and laws, the focus should be on the use of the language of the origin country. This should be fairly a straightforward job because basic laws and statutes do not undergo extensive revision every time, which reduces the need for frequent translation into different languages. This is important as unless migrant or refugee individuals are not educated about their immediate rights and responsibilities, they will always be in the dark and can get exploited by opportunistic people.

Conclusion

Australia has given shelter to refugees as well as migrants from different parts of the world since the end of World War II in 1945. Australia's approach to multiculturalism through different state policies has helped the state identify cultural differences, and linguistic and customary differences as important criteria for resource allocation, political participation and human rights improvement. Yet despite the best efforts put forward by the Australian government, there are issues plaguing the refugee and immigrant families in Australia such as financial issues, legal issues, accommodation problems, problems related to racism and discrimination. As well as mental and health problems, workplace issues and transportation issues. A closer look at the multitude of issues reveals that one is connected to the other through a common problem, which is a lack of education. The suggestion thus focuses on improving the accessibility, affordability and scope of education for migrant and refugee families. Some of the suggestions such as the use of subsidies to finance education for needy families are already in place in several parts of Australia. Thus some of the suggestions might have been

already in practice. Suggestions like incentivising the educational programs to make them more attractive for refugees and migrants' families may be new and might pose an added risk such as the non-availability of funds. Due to this the ongoing projects can stumble and get shut down. This can again bring back the people who have taken the time and initiative to pursue such educational programs to come back to square one and lose hope for improvement. Thus this can be launched on a long term pilot program basis which can be tracked end to end to check how many individuals are benefitted on a holistic level. This massive effort needs funding and thus must be taken on a legislative scale to create necessary provisions.

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