Children of African Refugee Families,

CHILDREN OF AFRICAN REFUGEE FAMILIES
FITTING INTO THE LOCAL SCHOOL SCENE

Abigail M. Brooker       Ying Han Lin
Nadia Albert            Kellie M. Karantzas
Agnes E. Dodds          Jeanette A. Lawrence

School of Behavioural Science,
The University of Melbourne,
Melbourne, Australia

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Authors: Abi Brooker¹, Ying Han Lin¹, Nadia Albert¹, Kellie Karantzas¹, Agnes Dodds², and Jeanette Lawrence¹.

¹ School of Behavioural Science, The University of Melbourne
² Medical Education Unit, The University of Melbourne

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Abi Brooker, School of Behavioural Science, University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia. Electronic mail may be sent to brookera@unimelb.edu.au.

Abstract

We investigated whether children of African refugee families were fitting in to their local school scene, or whether they were unintegrated and separated, by analysing children’s perceptions of their worlds, their goals and the people in their worlds. Three groups of primary school children from African, Disadvantaged and Advantaged Groups worked on an interactive computer program in a one-on-one interview. We identified five different patterns in how the children described their worlds - patterns not related to children’s cultural background or economic status. Children from African refugee families also held similar goals to other children, and nominated similar types of people who helped them and how they helped them. They nominated fewer people than other children as making things harder for them; and, on average, needed more of various skills and resources for going to high school than other children. We see the similar patterns in the worlds and goals of African and local children as evidence of fitting into the Australian school scene.
Recently, members of African communities in Australia were given some negative attention from the media, politicians, and the wider community, promoting questions about their how well they were integrating into Australian society. In October 2007, the then Minister for Immigration publicly commented that the African community was not integrating and was causing substantial problems and challenges for the wider Australian community. He described the African community as predominantly young, uneducated men establishing race-based gangs, drinking excessive alcohol, committing crimes and acts of violence (Andrews, 2007).

There was no clear evidence to support the minister’s comments, with some evidence dramatically pointing to alternate positions. For example, the African community is not over-represented in Victoria’s crime figures (“Sudanese crime only ’1 percent’”, 2007). A study of ethnic groups and gangs in Melbourne revealed that the activities of the Sudanese community, in particular, did not reflect any of the attitudes, behaviours, or activities of violent organised gangs (White, 1999). Rather, Sudanese youths expressed their daily experiences of institutional discrimination and cultural misunderstanding. Similarly, when ten Somali youths were given the opportunity to make a documentary about their experiences in Australia, their strongest theme revolved around their feelings of being discriminated against, isolated, and misunderstood (Nunn, Nguyen, & Sharp, 2007).

Clearly, policy-makers as well as researchers need to understand what it means for African young people to be growing up in Australia. The issue of children’s acculturation is particularly relevant to the discussion, because one of the strongest indicators of an immigrant group’s integration into a new culture is the successful and positive development of their children (Portes, 1995). In this paper we address the question of whether the children of African refugee families are fitting into the Australian culture and specifically fitting into Australian schools.

The children in the study were first-generation African Australians. Their families were resettling in Melbourne after experiences of war and famine, displacement and extreme deprivation (Browne, 2006). The cultural isolation and barriers experienced by their parents often mean these children do not begin to interact with the Australian culture until they start school. Prior to school, they live in an African world, albeit an African world set in an Australian suburb.

When people ask how well African children are integrating, what are the appropriate reference groups? As Goodnow (2008) points out, it is difficult to design a study that teases out the critical features of a particular vulnerable group’s context. Some features may be unique, such as the contemporary African community’s experiences of cultural isolation (Casimiro, Hancock, & Northcote, 2007). Some features may be held in common with other groups, such as the experience of poverty that refugees share with other vulnerable or marginalised groups in Australian cities.

Researchers have examined different issues for resettling ethnic groups by comparing various minority groups in the same or different countries (Phinney, Jacoby, & Silva, 2007; Portes, 1995), or different groups in the same locality (Syed & Azmita, 2008).

Surprisingly, few studies have attempted to tease out the distinctive influences of minority culture and poverty. We sought to distinguish the influences of family cultural background and socio-economic status, by comparing three groups of children in neighbouring suburbs. To a group of children from African refugee families at two disadvantaged schools in a state housing
area, we added a group of their classmates from local families at the same schools. These local children also were living mostly in state housing. We then added a group of children from local families who went to a nearby, more advantaged school serving a lower middle class catchment area. This gave us the opportunity of having three distinctive groups - “African”, “Disadvantaged” and “Advantaged” - from the same upper primary school grades at schools within a few kilometres of each other. The sampling design allowed us to search for any effects of growing up in a refugee family compared with growing up in a lower socio-economic neighbourhood in a local family, and with growing up in more advantaged circumstances.

We focused on how these children saw themselves in relation to their self-defined “worlds” and in particular their world of school. Students’ school, social, and family environments can have such specific values, expectations and relationships that their experiences have been described as living in different “worlds” (Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1991). While predominantly studying students’ abilities to move between multiple worlds, Phelan and colleagues reported that children in minority groups mostly lived in separate worlds, with hazardous or impossible transitions between these and the other worlds in their environments.

Several researchers have discovered the value of asking young people about their experiences of acculturation. Verkuyten and De Wolf (2002), for example, found that Chinese young people growing up in The Netherlands sometimes defined themselves as Chinese, and sometimes as Dutch. Young people make adjustments as they experience life in the multiple worlds of their ethnic culture and the wider community. Young Moroccan women interviewed by Ketner, Buitelaar, and Bosma (2004), again in The Netherlands, explained how their double-sided adjustments had led them to redefine themselves within their own Muslim tradition. They had various individualised ways of dealing with wearing the hijab (veil), for instance. Some wore it traditionally, others not at all, and others with a modern fashionable twist. Several commented that these adjustments made them no less Muslim and no less religious. They were working out how to live in two worlds. Cooper and her associates, however, (Cooper, Cooper, Azmita, Chavira, & Gullatt, 2002; Cooper & Denner, 1998) reported that ethnic minority students in California had distinctly separate family and school worlds. She (Cooper, 1999) had adapted Phelan et al.’s model of multiple worlds, acknowledging that each person plays an active role in creating and maintaining their own worlds.

Cooper et al. (2002) also asked young people about the roles other people played in helping or hindering them to move between their worlds. Their young participants reported how they relied on support from family members, teachers, and friends. These people acted as brokers between worlds, making it more possible for the young people to live in multiple environments.

Similarly, Oppedal, Roysamb, & Sam (2004) focused on the role of others in helping or hindering ethnic minority students as they went through acculturation processes into the wider community. Parents and ethnic community members were potential supporters for maintaining the ethnic culture. Classmates and teachers, in contrast, provided potential support for school students to develop the skills appropriate for the classroom. In each case, support was only provided if students felt their own cultural competence and demonstrated that competence in particular setting. The same people, however, who help can make things harder for young people. For example, friendship groups can be a source of support and also a source of anxiety for school children (Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003).

By asking the children in our study about the worlds they live in and their sense of
Children of African Refugee Families,

themselves and other people in their worlds, we hoped to gain fresh insights into how the children of African refugee families were integrating into the Australian school scene. Building on the approach developed by Cooper and her colleagues, we wanted to make it possible for primary school children from different backgrounds to identify their worlds in an accessible and supportive research environment. We wanted to allow them to be able to make considered judgments about how the people in their worlds help or hinder them at school.

In previous studies, we and our colleagues found that interactive computer programs made it possible for children and young people to make meaningful judgments. Computerised programs that are responsive to young participants’ activities allow them to construct illustrated diagrams, ratings and rankings, and to add their own open-ended comments to get across their own ideas, even about sensitive issues (Cashmore & Trimboli, 2005; Lawrence, 2003; Dodds, Dodson & Lawrence, 2006). The computer environment allows a young participant to work on a set of related tasks without being dependent on memory, by having prior responses returned to them on screen. We saw this methodological technique as well suited to take up the issue of whether African young people “fit in” or not, by comparing their views of their worlds with the views expressed by their local peers.

Accordingly, we developed for this study an interactive computer program that would allow children to identify their worlds and the people in them. We wanted them to be able to specify who among the people they personally identified they saw as helping or hindering their own moves towards achieving their goals for school. The program “Worlds of Kids” (Lawrence, Dodds, Campbell & McInnes, 2007) also allows children to express their thoughts and feelings about their goals and needs at school, using a combination of rating and open-ended responses. Figure 1 shows how the program asks children to make judgments about their worlds (a) and how the people in them help or make it harder (b & c).

Children’s interactions with their various environments have consistently been described by Eccles and her colleagues as making or lacking a goodness of fit between the child and that environment (Eccles, 2006; Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & Maclver, 1993). Goodness of fit is the interaction between the demands or expectations of the environment and the skills or resources of the child. A good fit occurs when the interaction is positive, when environmental demands and the child’s characteristics co-ordinate. The child feels socially accepted within that kind of person-by-environment interaction. A bad fit occurs when the co-ordination is less positive, and the child feels disconnected or alienated from the environment.

We investigated the goodness of fit between African Australian children and other children with their school related environment, in terms of how they perceived the demands, resources and opportunities of their environment and their “worlds” (Cooper, 1999). Do children from African refugee families have similar perceptions of their school environment as local school children?

Perceptions of the school environment and themselves within it can have a profound effect on children’s educational experiences. Children who see their school as supportive and inclusive
Children of African Refugee Families are more likely to promote school values and academic achievements (Garcia-Cole & Szalacha, 2004). Conversely, perceptions of discrimination or racism in the classroom can lead to poorer academic achievement (Phalet, Andriessen & Lens, 2004).

Oyserman (2007) correlated students’ academic achievement with their perceptions of their ‘future selves’, or their academic goals. Students’ academic goals reflected their understanding of cultural expectations, school-related opportunities, previous experiences, and their own self-efficacy. The interaction between these factors indicates that students can have different goals from each other, as well as multiple goals that conflict with each other (Boerkaerts, De Koning, & Vedder, 2006).

Portes (1999) described the perceptions of students of Mexican-descent in California. Two groups identified with the Mexican community, and had no specific issue with ‘white society’. They aspired to achieve academically. Two other groups, did see their group as conflicting with ‘white society’ but also were not involved with the Mexican community. They dismissed school-related achievement as ‘acting white’ and being disloyal to the group. These students’ school environment held conflicting values and expectations with their social environment, forcing them to sacrifice any academic achievements in favour of their social values. In this study, we directly asked children to specify what they wanted to achieve and to become at school. School-related goals are a particular window on children’s values in context.

Using the interactive, computerised methodology, and asking children to populate their self-defined worlds, we followed Phelan et al.’s (1991) original emphasis on relationships in worlds, and Cooper et al.’s (2002) focus on how other people help or make it harder to integrate. Are the school-related worlds and experiences of children of African refugee families like those of their local peers, making them a part of the local school scene, or are they distinctive, making these children separatists and unintegrated?

Method

Participants

Participants were 93 Grade 5 and 6 children in three groups. An African group included 12 boys and 10 girls with mean age of 11.40 (SD = 0.92). They came from African refugee families settling in an inner northern area of Melbourne. They attended one of two neighbouring primary schools set in areas of predominantly state housing and classed as disadvantaged schools. The Disadvantaged group were 18 boys and 24 girls from the same two disadvantaged schools. They came from non-African families living in the same suburbs. They had a mean age of 11.57 (SD = 0.78). We added a third, Advantaged group of 12 boys and 17 girls with a mean age of 11.06 (SD = 0.61). They attended a neighbouring school a few kilometres away in a lower middle class area where most families were buying their own home or renting privately. Children in this group were also from non-African families.

Materials

The children worked on an interactive computer program, “World of Kids” (Lawrence, et al., 2007) with a trained interviewer present to help the children navigate the program and to take notes. The program presented the children with a variety of tasks asking for multiple responses including generating diagrams of their worlds and populating these worlds with people. It began by explaining what was meant by “worlds”, illustrated with drawings of worlds belonging to Kim the Koala (my home, my old home, my school, my sport, my play). The interviewer made
sure each child knew the meaning of a world. After orienting the children to the concept of worlds, the program asked: “What worlds do you live in?” The children could specify as many or as few worlds as they wished, and type in a name to describe each world. Children then populated each world in response to the question “Who is in your worlds with you?”, by selecting adult and child figures and giving them names or stating their relationship, e.g., “mum”. The researcher later took out any names and replaced them with relationships. If children did not specify a school world, the program asked them to include a school world and populate it, and also asked if they were satisfied with the worlds they had nominated or if they wanted to include more. Figure 1 shows how children generated and populated their worlds.

The program next asked the children to type in three goals for themselves at school, “what you want to be or to achieve” and asked them what they needed to achieve their goals. Once the children typed in their goals, the program presented them with the figures of all the people in their worlds, and asked them to nominate who helped and then who made things harder for them to achieve their goals, and how they did so. Figure 1 (b &c) shows how the children could identify people as helpers or hinderers.

Next the program asked the children to rate how they felt about going to high school ranging from 0 = “very unhappy”, to 4 = “very happy”, with open-ended explanations of the meaning of the rating. Finally, the program presented children with a vertical, colour-coded rating scale and asked them to rate each of 14 possible needs for going to high school that were presented in random order ((0 = “I don’t need any more of it”, 1 = “I need a little bit more of it”, 2 = “I need a good bit more of it”, 3 = “I need a lot more of it”).

Procedure

Each child was taken through the computer program in a one-to-one session using a lap-top computer. One of four trained female interviewers helped the child use the program, typed responses if the child wished and took notes on the child’s work on the program and comments. The interviews took between 30 and 45 minutes.

Results

The results are reported in three sections: children’s perceptions of their worlds; their goals, and who helps them and who makes it harder for them to reach their goals; and children’s views about going to high school.

Children’s Perceptions of Their Worlds

All children identified at least one world in addition to the world of school that we specifically prompted them to add. Most of the children readily understood the task and identified worlds in terms of places, people (especially a world of friends) or activities (e.g., shopping, TV, computer games), with 20 specifying a world of play. Only one girl identified her worlds in an idiosyncratic way (“playful”, “loving”, “friendly”, “working”) that fell outside the coding system. We omitted her data from the analysis of worlds. One boy completed half the program, including his worlds and his goals. We analysed his data for these sections only.

We categorised each world specified by each child into one of five non-overlapping types in addition to the school world: Home, Sport, Friends, Activities, Play. Two psychologists coded and cross-checked each categorisation. Table 1 shows the five types of world, with examples. It also shows the percentages of the three groups who mentioned a world in each type. There were no differences for group, gender or grade in the types of worlds the children specified. The only
difference for gender was that more boys than girls generated a sports world (73% > 48%), __
\((1,92) = 6.32, p = .02\).

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

We next looked for patterns across the worlds the children generated, adopting a person-
oriented approach using a cluster analysis that identifies subgroups of participants across all
three groups (von Eye & Bogart, 2006). Within the sample of 92 children, there were five
clusters (subgroups) of children that could be identified in terms of the distinctive patterns of
worlds they generated. We used a Hierarchical Cluster Analysis with Ward’s method and
Squared Euclidean distances for the five types of worlds. As a check on our subgroups, a
Discriminant Function Analysis of the five types of worlds and the number of types of worlds
that children created, correctly classified 99% of children into their cluster group. Table 2 shows
the patterns of worlds generated by children in the five cluster subgroups.

TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE

All children in the first three cluster subgroups (C1: Home, C2: Home and Play, C3: Home
and Activities) generated a Home world (55, 60%), and so did most of C4: Friends (25 of 27).
However, none of the 12 children in C5: Sport generated a Home world. The 14 children in C2:
Home and Play also generated a Play world, with several adding either Sport (43%) or Activities
(21%) worlds. All 18 children in C3: Home and Activities also generated an Activities world,
with 60% adding a Sports world. All 25 children in C4: Friends generated a world populated by
friends, with most adding Home (80%), Sport (60%), or Activities (56%) worlds.

Only the 12 children in C5: Sport did not mention worlds involving either home or friends,
with seven generating an Activities world among their world of sport. It is remarkable that
these 12 children did not generate worlds defined in terms of family or friendship relationships.
Seven of them, however, had included parents when they populated their worlds, and 10
included other family members. So, it was not that they had no families, but that they did not
spontaneously identify their own worlds in terms of home or family. Only five children did not
include parents when they populated any of their worlds, suggesting they were neglecting family
in a more definite way.

Children’s Goals at School

The children identified up to three school-related goals in their open-ended responses. Again,
there was general agreement across the three groups. All mentions of goals were coded into eight
categories. The only gender difference for goals was that fewer boys had maths goals than girls
(41% of boys, 61% of girls, ASR = -2.0), \((1,93) = 3.8, p = .05\) (where ASR is the Adjusted
Standardised Residual identifying the significantly different cell). Table 3 shows the percentage
of children in the three groups who identified each type of goal, with examples.

In order of most frequently nominated goal, the eight goal types were: Maths, English
(including comprehension), Career, Personal, Reading, Miscellaneous subjects, Sport, and
Social. There were no significant differences between groups, cluster subgroups or grade level (Grade 5 or Grade 6) on the types of goals that children identified.

TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE

People Who Help

Children in the three groups tended to agree about who helped them towards reaching their goals at school. Drawing on the people whom they placed in their worlds, and with the possibility of adding others, the children each nominated between one and 14 people who helped them, with an average number of 4.5 helpers (SD = 2.9) (African: M = 4.4, SD = 3.2, Disadvantaged: M = 4.7 SD = 3.2, Advantaged: M = 4.3 SD = 2.2). The three groups did not differ in the number or type of helpers they nominated. They mentioned parents, other family members, teachers, coaches and friends as helping them to achieve their goals. Figure 2 shows the percentages of the three groups who mentioned a helper and/or a hinderer (a person who made it harder) in each type of parents, other family members, friends, teachers.

FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE

Children were given the opportunity to type in how these helping people made things easier for them to reach their goals. There were three categories of help. Out of 92 children, 52 (56%) described people helping them by doing school work with them (e.g., “help me with homework”, “practice with me”). Thirty-five children (38%) described people helping them through encouragement (e.g., “always there for you”, “she is proud of me”). Forty-one children (44%) described people helping them by providing practical support and advice (e.g., “tell me how to work it out”, “lunch, dinner, pick me up, take me”). There were no differences for group, gender, grade, or for the five cluster groups on how children saw people helping them to reach their goals.

People Who Make it Harder

Children in the three groups differed in whom they saw as making it harder for them to reach their goals (8, N = 103) = 22.1, p = .01. More children in the African group (77%, ASR = 3.9) than in the Disadvantaged group (24%) or the Advantaged group (45%) said that no one made things harder for them. More of the Disadvantaged group nominated friends (41%, ASR = 2.7). Figure 2 shows these patterns.

The children on average nominated fewer people who made things harder than helped, t(92) = 11.0, p = .00. They nominated up to nine people who made things harder for them, with an average of 1.1 (SD = 1.5) hinderers (African: M = 0.4, SD = 0.7; Disadvantaged: M = 1.6, SD = 1.8; Advantaged: M = 0.9 SD = 1.1).

Children were also given the opportunity to type in how people made things harder for them to reach their goals. All of the children who nominated people who made it harder provided a description of how these people made it harder. Also, two children who did not nominate people provided descriptions of how people make it harder. Children’s responses were coded into four
categories: distraction (17%), fighting (17%), bossiness (16%), hurting my feelings (14%). There were no differences for group, gender, grade, or cluster subgroup on how children saw people making it harder for them to reach their goals.

**People who help or make it harder for cluster subgroups.** There were several differences in the patterns of helpers and hinderers for the five cluster subgroups, regardless of their demographic characteristics.

Children in C4: Friends nominated more teachers as helpers than other subgroups (C1: 44%, C2: 31%, C3: 61%, C4: 76%, C5: 42%, \( ASR = 2.6 \), \( _{(4, N = 91)} = 9.82, p = 0.04 \)). They also nominated more teachers as hinderers than children in other subgroups (20% compared with none of those in C1, C2, or C5, and 6% of C3, \( ASR = 3.2 \), \( _{(4, N = 91)} = 10.72, p = 0.03 \)). Only two children in C4 did not include teachers in the people that populated their worlds. So it seems that children with at least one socially-oriented world of friends also saw teachers as significant in their worlds.

Children in C3: Home and Activities nominated more family members as helpers than children in other cluster groups, (C1: 65%, C2: 46%, C3: 83%, C4: 52%, C5 33%, \( ASR = 2.4 \), \( _{(4, N = 91)} = 9.36, p = 0.05 \)). All children in this cluster group had included family members as people populating their worlds. They tended to see family members as involved in their shopping, outings and hobbies etc. that were included in their worlds of Activities.

Fewer of the children in C5: Sport (those without Home or Friends worlds) nominated fewer parents as helpers than children in other cluster groups, (C1: 83%, C2: 92%, C3: 78%, C4: 76%, C5 42%: \( ASR = -3.0 \), \( _{(4, 91)} = 10.18, p = 0.04 \)). Five children in C5: Sport actually did not include parents as people who populated their worlds.

**Children’s Views about Going to High School**

On average, children were happy about going to high school (\( Mean \ rating = 3.0, SD = 0.8 \), with a rating scale of 0 = very unhappy to 4 = very happy, where 2 = not happy, not unhappy). There were no differences between groups, gender, grade level, or cluster subgroups for how children felt about going to high school.

We coded children’s explanations for their feeling of going to high school into five reasons. Children gave an average of 1.4 (\( SD = 0.68 \)) reasons each. Table 4 shows examples of the children’s reasons for their ratings, including references to people, learning new things, growing up, school environment, or emotional statements. Only two children gave no reasons for their ratings.

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The two children who were unhappy about going to high school both provided reasons related to the changing school environment, and also negative emotions (e.g., “I’m too scared” “Unhappy”). Both also referred to having friends at high school.

Of the 20 children who were ambivalent about going to high school (“not happy and not unhappy”), 55% provided both positive and negative responses, as the rating scale suggested. Another 30% only expressed negative feelings to explain their mixed rating.
Children who were happy about going to high school used the same types of reasons as other children, but their reasons mostly reflected a positive perspective and greater self-efficacy. Only one girl who were happy about going to high school provided a negative reason for her rating.

**Children’s Needs for Going to High School**

Children had similar patterns of what they needed for going to high school, with an average rating of 1.5 \((SD = 0.7)\), where 0 = “I don’t need any more of it”, 1 = “I need a little bit more of it”, 2 = “I need a good bit more of it”, and 3 = “I need a lot more of it”. The African group’s mean rating was higher than the Disadvantaged group and the Advantaged group (For African: \(M = 2.0\), \(SD = 0.7\); For Disadvantaged: \(M = 1.5\), \(SD = 0.7\); For Advantaged, \(M = 1.2\), \(SD = 0.5\)), \(F(2, N = 92) = 11.1, p = .00\). There were no differences for gender, grade level, or cluster groups.

The mean ratings for each of the 14 needs are shown for all children in Table 5, in order of greatest to lowest rating. To be better at maths, to have more confidence, and to be better at writing were given relatively high ratings. More money for the uniform, to be better at sport, and better lunches were given relatively low ratings.

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**Discussion**

We set out to investigate whether children of African refugee families were fitting into the Australian school scene, or whether they were growing up separate, and not being integrated in the Australian community. We took children’s generation of their own worlds and of the people in them as indicators of how they were thinking about their experiences. We used an attractive, interactive computer program to make it possible for children from ethnic and disadvantaged backgrounds to express their thoughts and feelings. The program provided a research environment that gave each child a chance to generate worlds and to make their own comments, so that any distinctive features of their perceptions and emphases could be expressed in a supportive and carefully constructed activity.

While other studies have found it useful to ask older young people about their adjustments to their multiple worlds (Cooper et al., 2002; Phelan et al., 1991), there is little prior work about younger children’s views. We were interested in how this first generation growing up in Australia would position themselves in their worlds, in comparison with the responses from their local peers.

The three comparison groups provided a useful basis to focus on the present experiences of children as they neared the end of primary school. It allowed us to see if any group differences were specifically related to being African, or to being poor and from a disadvantaged area and school (Goodnow, 2008).

The evidence is clear. These children growing up in the northern suburbs of Melbourne were experiencing their worlds, themselves and other people in their worlds in generally similar ways. If we had called our groups ‘A, B, and C’, it would have been difficult to mark out who were Africans and who came from either the poorer or the more advantaged environments.
In general, these children from African refugee families said they lived in the same types of worlds. They had the same types of goals. They nominated the same types of people who helped them and how they helped them. They differed from the local children in two ways. The majority of African children said that no one was making things harder for them. They, on average, indicated they needed more skills and resources for going to high school.

Immigrant and refugee families often emphasise how much they have sacrificed to create a ‘better life’ for their children. Children’s awareness of these sacrifices could encourage values such as respect and remaining open to every opportunity presented to them (Portes, 1995). Their awareness of their parents’ hardships and sacrifices may be behind the African children saying that people in their lives did not make their achievements harder. Such awareness and a cultural respectfulness could underlie the African children’s greater emphasis on their needs for high school, also suggesting why their greater needs showed up as an average rating of all needs rather than at the level of the 14 specific needs. Immigrant families typically have high aspirations for their children, and their children may be oriented towards seeing themselves needing the skills, resources and support to allow them to progress through school.

By asking children to identify their own worlds, as recommended by Cooper (1999), we were able to identify five distinct patterns in the worlds the children generated. Some worlds were exclusive to family members; others were exclusive to friends; still others were neither exclusive to family nor to friends. It is possible that the different patterns in our study reflect how some children see their worlds as congruent and some as separate worlds (Phelan, 1991). A child’s inclusion of a particular world could come from current salient interests. Sport seemed to fulf ill that role for several, especially the Africans. It re-occurred, for instance, in their goals. Alternatively, a child may have generated multiple worlds, thinking about them as the different places and relationships where s/he spread interests. In our next round of studies, we are asking children whether their worlds are separate or connected, and why.

As we expected, some African children identified earlier homes and family constellations (e.g., Kenya, Egypt, cousins, aunties and uncles). But several local children also mentioned other family locations (e.g., Queensland, Gippsland, “Dad’s home”). Underlying these “other homes” and extended families was the general theme of “my home” and “my family”.

That the children had their own, self-designated cast of “people in your school and other worlds” to later specify as helpers or hinderers cannot be seen as a methodological constraint. Rather, it gave the children extended possibilities for designating among their own casts certain people as helpful or unhelpful or both.

Only five children did not include parents in any of their worlds. Seven others had parents and family members available in the casts of their worlds, but did not identify them as either helpers or hinderers. This suggests that either these children may not have been thinking of their parents as consciously as the other 81 children, or that they simply took them for granted. In our first attempt to identify children’s perceptions of their worlds, we find the absence of parents and family in one subgroup worth pursuing with other forms of data.

The differences in patterns of worlds for the five cluster subgroups is new information about the views of children. At this early stage in our research, we cannot make too much of the different patterns that cut across group and gender. Further studies currently in progress will show if those patterns point to children’s own emphases.
The goals the children spontaneously typed into the computer were related to academic subjects, or to personal improvement, or to careers they wanted to pursue. There was variability in the types of careers they wanted to follow (ranging from “builder” to “doctor” and “archaeologist”), and variability in the school subjects in which they wanted to improve (e.g., maths, English, writing). The types of goals were all expected aspirations for young students identified in the Victorian primary school curriculum (Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2005). So it may be that, to some extent, the children were reflecting school culture.

The similarities between goals could be seen in terms of feeling capable of achieving one’s goals, especially academic and career goals (Oyserman, 2008). This contrasts with studies that report ethnic minority children having lower expectations of their own academic abilities and potential (Oyserman, 2008; Phelan, 1991; Portes, 1995). In line with those trends, we may have expected more restricted expressions of goals from the African and Disadvantaged groups. Their optimism also may be related to the children’s young age. Harter, Whitesell & Kowalski (1992) report that children in America have high early perceptions of their academic abilities, but come to devalue their abilities as they move from the equivalent of primary school to high school.

Certainly all these children were in supportive school environments. The schools strove to provide supportive, inclusive, and stimulating environments for their students, and to encourage them to see themselves positively. Such encouraging environments can reduce if not reverse the often held negative perceptions of ethnic minority and refugee children (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002).

It may be claimed that the similarities and differences we found were an artifact of our research environment. The computer program was attractive and gave children the perceptual set-up of the worlds of Kim the Koala. This set-up explained what we meant by “worlds”, with the supportive comments of the researcher. Were we simply prompting the children to generate worlds they would not have considered otherwise? Possibly, but within the program, the children were free to generate as many or as few worlds and to label them in any way they wished. They responded to this task enthusiastically. Our only stipulation was to ask for a school world at the end of the process.

If the patterns we found in worlds and people represent individual differences in responding to the set-up materials about Kim’s worlds, that in itself may suggest a particular way of valuing specific parts of one’s own experience. The variations in patterns of helpers and hinderers for the cluster subgroups, at least, point to some sustained emphases or preferences. The greater appearance of teachers among the helpers for the subgroup with a socially defined world of friends, for example, is particularly intriguing.

The sunny dispositions of the children of African refugee families and the similarities between their perceptions and the perceptions of other children suggest good fit between themselves and their school environment (Eccles et al., 1993). Although at this point we can point to a good fit, it will be critical to see if this fit changes as the children move out of the supportive environments of the primary school and into the unfamiliar environments of the high school.

In conclusion, the perceptions and experiences of the African Australian children in our study do not point to a community that is “not integrating with Australian culture”, or “causing serious problems and challenges for the Australian community” (Andrews, October 4, 2007). Overall, children from African refugee families were fitting in to the local school scene along
Children of African Refugee Families

with their local peers.

References


Children of African Refugee Families


Table 1.

*Percentages of Three Groups Generating Five Types of World, with Examples*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of world (with examples)</th>
<th>Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home:</td>
<td>N = 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;my home, old home&quot;, &quot;family&quot;,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Somalia, Australia&quot; (with family populating),</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Mums house, Dads house&quot;</td>
<td>81.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;friends&quot;, &quot;my friends&quot;, &quot;Sarah&quot;, &quot;friends home&quot;</td>
<td>27.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Sports&quot;, &quot;soccer&quot;, &quot;baseball&quot;, &quot;runni</td>
<td>59.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;reading&quot;, &quot;going shopping&quot;, &quot;the dog and budgies&quot;</td>
<td>45.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;playing&quot;, &quot;fun&quot;, &quot;in the park&quot;</td>
<td>21.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.

*Percentage of Ninety-two Children in Five Cluster Subgroups with Distinct Patterns of Generated Worlds*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cluster Subgroup:</th>
<th>% of 92</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Mean No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1: Home</td>
<td>25.00 %</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>43.48</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>1.4 (0.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Af = 7, Dis = 11, Adv = 5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2: Home and Play</td>
<td>15.22</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>21.43</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>2.6 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Af = 1, Dis = 7, Adv = 6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3: Home and Activities</td>
<td>19.57</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>61.11</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>2.6 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Af = 3, Dis = 9, Adv = 6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4: Friends</td>
<td>27.17</td>
<td>80.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>68.00</td>
<td>56.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>3.2 (0.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Af = 7, Dis = 9, Adv = 9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5: Sport</td>
<td>13.04</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>91.66</td>
<td>58.33</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>1.9 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Af = 4, Dis = 6, Adv = 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.

*Percentage of Children in Three Groups Specifying Eight Types of Goal for School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal Type:</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Africa (n = 22)</th>
<th>Disadvantage (n = 43)</th>
<th>Advantage (n = 29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>“Counting up to a million”, “Learn all my times tables”</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>46.5%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>“Better at spelling”, “Be better at my writing”</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>“Doctor”, “Teacher”, “Nurse”, “Archaeologist”</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>“Become a good person in my life”, “Be a person who concentrates”</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>“Kick the ball straight”, “Good basketballer”, “Better in sport”</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General learning</td>
<td>“Get into High Achievers group”, “Work on a computer”</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>“Reading”, “Be a better reader”</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social goals</td>
<td>“Have friends”, “Include more people”, “Be school captain”</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.

**Percentage of Ninety-two Children Expressing Reasons for their Ratings of Feelings about Going to High School, with Examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Reason:</th>
<th>Children’s Ratings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very unhappy, unhappy (1; n = 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>100% “I’m scared of making friends”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing up</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning new things</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School environment</td>
<td>100 “it’s like going to another world”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional responses</td>
<td>100 “unhappy”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Ninety-two Children’s Ratings of their Needs for Going to High School*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For going to high school, I need:</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To be better at maths</td>
<td>2.0 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have more confidence</td>
<td>1.9 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be better at writing</td>
<td>1.8 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be surer of themselves</td>
<td>1.7 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More information about high school</td>
<td>1.7 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents to know more about high school</td>
<td>1.6 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends to go with me</td>
<td>1.6 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be better at reading</td>
<td>1.5 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More money for books</td>
<td>1.5 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More pens and pencils</td>
<td>1.4 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be better at making friends</td>
<td>1.4 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More money for the uniform</td>
<td>1.2 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be better at sport</td>
<td>1.1 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better lunches</td>
<td>1.0 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Rating scale ranged from 0 = I don’t need any more of it, 1 = I need a little bit more of it, 2 = I need a good bit more of it, 3 = I need a lot more of it.
Figure 1. The Processes by which Participants (a) Generate Worlds and Populate their Worlds with People, and Using their Generated Worlds, (Nominate, People (b) Who Help and (c) Who make it Harder for them to Reach their Goals.
Figure 2. Three groups’ Nominations of People Who Help them and Make Things Harder for Them to Achieve their Goals.