

African refugees with interrupted schooling in the high school mainstream: Dilemmas for teachers

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ABSTRACT

Sudanese refugees currently constitute the largest single group of arrivals to Australia under the humanitarian immigration program. Many have been in camps, experienced trauma, lost members of their families, had minimal schooling and arrive with little or no literacy. Although many aspire to attend and to complete high school, they constitute an extremely high-risk group, which faces great challenges in terms of adaptation to the school system, acculturation, social adaptation, English-language learning and eventual academic success. Even where literacy levels are good, and years of schooling are commensurate with chronological age, many immigrant and refugee students find the mainstream curriculum and its language demands very difficult. What is happening to Sudanese students placed into the mainstream after one year or less in a language centre? This paper will report on some findings from a qualitative research project involving case studies of Sudanese students and their teachers in Victorian schools. It focuses on the links between these students' literacy development and their social backgrounds and practices, and the dilemmas faced by their teachers. This article reports on the perspectives of teachers working with these students, their views of the kinds of challenges the students have in adapting to high school, the levels of language and literacy support provided by the schools, and the implications for their own pedagogy.

Background

In the wake of colonialism, countries in the Horn of Africa have faced ongoing civil war and humanitarian crises for over 20 years, and by the 1990s Australia was among the countries that began to accept refugees from this part of Africa. In accordance with the recommendations of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, since 2001 Australia has granted a total of 16 759 humanitarian visas to persons born in Africa, with almost 11 000 visas (65 per cent) going to Sudanese refugees. Sudan has been noted as the 'major source country by birthplace', accounting for the highest

increase (105 per cent) in this period (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs [DIMIA] 2004a). In Victoria, the Sudanese constituted 16.8 per cent of the Humanitarian Program settler arrivals in 2002–03 (DIMIA 2004b), a percentage set to increase in coming years. It should be noted that this group of refugees represents considerable linguistic and cultural diversity, and includes members from different areas of Sudan and different tribes, and with different languages, religions and cultural traditions. The south of Sudan is predominantly a tribal African region surviving on subsistence farming, with many South Sudanese being Christians, whereas the north is primarily Muslim and Arabic-speaking, with historical and cultural ties to the North African Islamic heritage. Most Sudanese arriving in Australia are from South Sudan. In spite of the diversity of Sudanese refugees, for the purposes of this research, we focused on the unifying features of participants as refugees with severely interrupted education, meaning that they had little or no literacy in either the first or second language prior to arrival.

Although the Australian 2001 Census noted that about 22 per cent of Australia's population was born overseas, with nearly two-thirds being from non-English speaking countries (DIMIA 2003), large numbers of refugee students with interrupted schooling represent both a quantitative and qualitative shift in the kinds of students now entering Australian schools. The difficulties these children have in achieving academic success have been widely recognised in the research literature both in Australia and elsewhere (Collier 1995; Rutter and Jones 1998; Fantino and Colak 2001; Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock 2002). Such difficulties include the trauma and dislocation associated with fleeing war and living in refugee camps, problems in learning English and other mainstream subjects, adjustment to a new educational system and social conditions, physical disability and/or malnutrition, and the loss of family and familiar culture. In classrooms, teachers find that some of these students are withdrawn, aggressive, unable to concentrate, anxious or hyperactive (Coelho 1998). It is important to note the paucity of research in this area, particularly in the Australian context. Much of the background research drawn on in this paper is from overseas but, while we acknowledge contextual difficulties in using this material, many of the core concepts are useful in the local context.

The factors above also disrupt identity formation as students seek ways to balance conflicting demands and to reconcile their present and past lives (Fantino and Colak 2001; Bolea et al 2003). Other studies indicate that experience of war creates additional specific needs, which should be identified (Pryor 2001), and that mental health needs often remain unmet

for refugee children (Almqvist and Broberg 1999; Fazel and Stein 2003). Over two million Sudanese, for example, have died in ongoing war and terror, the majority being men. In our study, only two of nine students lived with both parents. The likelihood that schools or education departments will of themselves tackle the problems of social justice and equity for these students is far from a given, and even where there are explicit attempts to support students on a school-wide basis, success is sometimes only partial (Wagner 1998). However, as Lo Bianco (1998: 1) stresses, we cannot leave English as a Second Language (ESL) students' rights to participate fully in their education to 'osmotic processes and blind faith'.

Current educational provision

Provision for Sudanese and other refugee students with interrupted schooling, in terms of intensive on-arrival English-language programs, varies widely from state to state (for example, ranging from nine months in some Victorian centres to two years in Western Australia), and state funding for ongoing mainstream support also varies. In Victoria, the state in which the research reported in this paper is located, there are nine such programs in the Melbourne metropolitan area. In addition, in 2003 in Victoria, 479 mainstream schools were provided with ESL index funding of \$22.9 million for the purposes of supporting 46 821 students from non-English speaking backgrounds, while \$7 million was allocated to 243 government schools to fund the provision of multicultural education aides. These aides assist students in class or on a one-to-one basis, and act as a link between the school and parents (Department of Education and Training Victoria 2004). Student eligibility for ESL index funding requires that the main language spoken at home is not English and that they have been enrolled in an Australian school for fewer than seven years. Information gathered from the 2003 Victorian ESL Survey reveals that 6.9 per cent of the 46 821 ESL secondary students started school in Australia at or after normal commencement age with minimal, severely interrupted or no previous formal schooling in any country. However, given the difficulty of determining what 'interrupted schooling' means, our concern is that the number of students in this category may be much higher. For example, one study has found that for some students who stated they had several years of education, this amounted to 'non-continuous instruction in refugee camps consisting of a few hours a week' (West Coast AMES 2001: 4).

The Victorian State Department of Education and Training provides for 6–12 months of targeted English language support prior to mainstream school enrolment, a period established over many years and designed to

cater for students with significant years of prior schooling. This length of time is not sufficient for students with disrupted schooling to gain adequate language or academic skills (Collier 1995) and one study has strongly advocated extending the funding and period of time for such students, particularly if they have lost a parent or been in refugee camps (Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock 2002). Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock also recommend class sizes of six for preliterate students, tailored catch-up programs and constant monitoring of the provision to assess outcomes in relation to mainstream schooling. The problem in developing such policy is that the length of time allocated to students is short and not very flexible. That is, it may be 12 months regardless of the characteristics and needs of students (Garcia 2000). Garcia also stresses that decisions about movement to the mainstream are seldom based on academic progress in English. This can be especially problematic where there are huge gaps in education and high social and economic needs. Policy is dictated by funding, and not by educational need. Furthermore, such decisions are sometimes based on a student's oral proficiency, which does not indicate readiness for the high cognitive and linguistic demands of mainstream classrooms (Carrasquillo and Rodríguez 2002).

Interrupted schooling and the acquisition of literacy

In this section we consider some implications of interrupted schooling, and we revisit research about how long it takes to acquire a second language, particularly the academic language of the mainstream curriculum. Refugee students with interrupted schooling face the daunting task of acquiring English in the mainstream, often after a brief intensive program. In a study of four school districts, based on data from 10000 ESL students in Canada and the USA, Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2000: 13) found policy provision of one-year programs of sheltered English immersion were 'wildly unrealistic'. Students must acquire social communication skills and academic writing and speaking skills, while attempting to catch up to native-speaking peers, who themselves are continuing to develop academic and language competence. The complexity of language acquisition itself cannot be overemphasised. Hakuta, Butler and Witt's study corroborates a body of research and evidence that estimates that in optimum circumstances it takes three to five years to develop oral language proficiency and four to seven years to gain academic English proficiency. These times are much longer for disadvantaged children, those in poor schools and those with interrupted schooling, with some studies suggesting it takes up to ten years for such students to acquire academic proficiency (see Garcia 2000).

So what are students actually missing when they have severely interrupted schooling? In addition to the clear importance of cognitive development, which takes place over many years at school, the language of Australian school classrooms features a highly specific form of English, incorporating particular ways of being and behaving and vast amounts of prior knowledge, along with cultural expectations and understandings. The knowledge of how to 'be a student', and indeed look like one, entails many skills, behaviours, formative experiences and a great deal of knowledge. These are huge challenges for students arriving aged 15, with minimal or no schooling. In addition, apparent oral fluency achieved by many refugee students quite quickly can be highly misleading for teachers, who expect transfer to, and similarly 'smooth' acquisition of, academic skills (Hakuta, Butler and Witt 2000). Since Cummins' work on the contrasts between basic interpersonal language and academic language (see, for example, Cummins 1984), a vast body of research has shown the complexity and specificity of cognitive academic language use in schools. Students with interrupted education lack the topic-specific vocabularies of academic subjects, understandings of register and genre, cultural backgrounds to scaffold their understanding, social understandings of how to 'be' in the classroom, and learning strategies to process content. Often they do not have first language literacy to support the acquisition of a new language, or the concepts and the dispositions needed to succeed in mainstream classrooms (see Garcia 2000). For many of these students print-based materials themselves are an enormous challenge (West Coast AMES 2001; Muir 2003).

The importance of cognitive development and literacy in the first language for second-language acquisition has been clearly acknowledged for many years (Collier 1989, 1995; Carrasquillo and Rodríguez 2002). The transfer of language mastery and cognitive development in the primary language to academic work in an additional language is the primary basis for a strong case for bilingual education. However, where schools have students from 30 or more language backgrounds, as is often the case in Australia, bilingual approaches have limited feasibility. The implications of the importance of first language literacy for the types of ESL provision offered to refugee students with interrupted schooling are enormous. As Davison (2001: 34) writes:

a recently arrived Somali pre-literate refugee cannot be treated the same way as a Hong Kong-born student who has studied EFL since primary school and has had successful and uninterrupted L1 literacy development and schooling in Hong Kong.

Even students who have been to schools in refugee camps have often simply copied work from boards, and learned it by rote (West Coast AMES

2001). Acknowledging and responding with appropriate and adequate programs to students with very high needs and no first language literacy therefore remain great challenges for governments, education departments and schools.

THE STUDY

This small qualitative study was designed to gain insights into the social and academic experiences of refugee students with interrupted schooling once they had entered the high school mainstream, and the responses and needs of their teachers. In the larger study, of which this article forms a part, participants were from two government high schools in disadvantaged outer metropolitan areas of Melbourne, and included nine African refugee students and eight of their teachers. Both schools were selected because they had large numbers of refugee students from Africa, and particularly Sudan, and through informal contacts administrators in the schools had indicated an interest in participating in the project. Eight mainstream and ESL teachers volunteered to be part of the research because they were keen to talk about their experiences. The teachers' experiences in working with these students ranged from one to five years. Two of the teachers had taught for fewer than three years, and the remaining six teachers had between nine and 25 years of experience. Teachers were from a range of subject areas, including ESL (three), Mathematics (one), Mathematics and Science (one), Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) (two) and Geography (one). One ESL teacher was the ESL coordinator for her school.

In the larger study, interviews were conducted with students and focus groups with teachers. In this paper we report on the teacher focus group data only. These semi-structured focus groups were conducted in groups of four to generate conversation and exchange of ideas. Each interview group, therefore, represents the teachers working in one of the schools involved in the study. The focus group questions focused on teachers' experiences, practices and dilemmas in working with these students. Our particular concern in reporting this data is to respond to the following research questions on the basis of the teachers' perceptions:

- What kinds of problems do Sudanese students have in adapting to high school?
- In what ways do the intensive language programs in the first year scaffold their academic performance in the mainstream?
- How is literacy development related to social and cultural practices for these students?

- What kinds of challenges do teachers face when working with these students?

To analyse the data we identified and coded key themes and issues, and mapped them across the data from teachers and students to find interrelated areas of interest (Miller and Glassner 1997). In what follows, we outline the main themes from the teacher interview data. Teachers across both schools made similar comments and we have not differentiated between schools in the analysis.

WHAT THE TEACHERS SAY

Analysis of the teacher data revealed a number of key issues relating to actual teaching on the one hand and to the students themselves on the other. In regard to the teaching of refugee students, these included three main areas. First, teachers expressed a sense of dealing with a new and highly vulnerable group for which their prior teaching experience had not prepared them, accompanied at times by feelings that they were barely able to cope with the demands. Second, teachers repeatedly mentioned the difficulty of finding suitable texts and resources for these students. There was also discussion around the use of dictionaries. Finally, teachers claimed there were often tense relationships between ESL language school staff and high school mainstream staff, which centred on the different roles and expectations within these two contexts. In regard to what the teachers said about the students, two key issues emerged. These were, first, what teachers termed the 'unrealistic expectations' of the students and associated resistance to any program deemed 'special' or non-mainstream by the students, and, second, the issue of relationships between these students and staff, and also with other students. The data on relationships indicated instances of physical and verbal aggression, emotional disturbance and racism. Even though this is a relatively small study with eight teachers, these are serious and complex issues involving pedagogy, teacher and student identities, social relations, learning styles, resources for learning and the impact of affective factors. Clearly, these issues cannot all be addressed adequately in one paper, and we have selected two factors related to teaching to focus on here: dealing with a new situation that challenges the professional identity of teachers and finding suitable texts and resources. These issues emerged most frequently in the data and had strong implications for pedagogical practice. In the first of these two issues, we will include some reference to the teachers' perceptions of students' expectations as they relate to actual classroom teaching.

Dealing with a new situation: Challenging teachers' professional identities

As a number of seasoned ESL practitioners have pointed out to us, African refugees are not the first groups to arrive in our schools with minimal literacy and/or backgrounds of deprivation and trauma. However, the teachers in this study insisted that a combination of factors made the new cohorts of refugees with interrupted schooling distinct from prior groups of Vietnamese boat children, Cambodians or Bosnians who had also experienced war and trauma. One teacher pointed out that many African students come from oral cultural traditions, whereas she perceived Vietnam as a 'literate culture' and said even poor Vietnamese parents were often literate or good at maths. While teachers talked about 'the Sudanese' or 'the Somalis', they noted significant cultural and linguistic differences within student groups from each country of origin. For example, regarding the Sudanese students, teachers mentioned differences of language, religion and prior education. That is, they were careful to avoid stereotyping, acknowledging diversity within the groups. The key factors that the teachers identified as being shared by the students and their families were lack of schooling and pre-migration experiences, which have had severe consequences for this group's language and literacy development.

The teachers identified some of the factors that, in combination, make the African refugee students in this study different from former groups, in their views. These include: the length of time spent in refugee camps or as asylum seekers in other countries; the trauma of war and the camps; severe disruption to schooling; frequent absence of an intact family; lack of literacy in the first language (for example, Dinka or Nuer) and hybridised forms of a second language other than English (for example, Arabic); lack of parental education; highly assertive or aggressive behaviour; and unrealistic expectations and goals. Here are some of the teachers' comments:

I was going through mediation with a Sudanese girl because of a lot of confusion about what she was thinking and what's going on and her attitude towards me and so on, so I'm finding personally the Sudanese very different to any other ESL students that we've had through the school so far.

(Maths teacher)

I have the situation presently where I have some Sudanese students who have had a lot of schooling who came to Australia with a very good background of English so learning is quite easy, not just the learning side of it but the rituals of school. As well I have students who have lived in refugees camps for ten years and have no background in schooling, not just the learning again, but the rituals of school, how to cope with the day to day, the system of bells and

requirements. So I find this in class particularly this year, more than any other year that I've taught, those extremes are very wide. (ESL teacher A)

Two issues emerging from the comments above are, first, the intensification of the difficulties in working with these students and, second, the difference between the effects of 'a lot of schooling' and a 'background of English' as opposed to interrupted schooling. Some of the rituals identified by other teachers included organisational skills, time management, the ability to organise a folder or find yesterday's worksheet and so on. Interrupted schooling of course had dire effects on numeracy as well as literacy, particularly in relation to content knowledge.

[The kids] we are experiencing who we are getting here at the moment, they have a lot of gaps in there, and especially in something like mathematics and science where everything is skill-based and everything is sort of built on a skill previously. It's very hard to pitch at the right level and a lot of them, they vary, their skills vary and the gaps vary as well. (Maths teacher)

This teacher further commented that she needed to go back to basic number operations for Year 10 students. Students did not know the difference between a fraction and a percentage, and her comment was, 'that's not the part we are supposed to be teaching'. Mainstream teachers acknowledged the skills of their ESL colleagues in understanding and knowing the students better, but felt further that long experiences in teaching were of little practical use.

ESL teachers know more how to deal with ESL students. I thought I *did* because I've been teaching in the mainstream for a long time, but lately I don't feel like I'm coping with it very well and I'm not doing a very good job of it, which is a bit scary for me because normally I've felt like I've been able to work in an ESL school and do it quite well. I feel I'm not getting a lot of support at all at the moment, and I have been feeling very frustrated about it all this year. (Maths/Science teacher)

How can we possibly put all the students in one class, when firstly they enter? They come to [name of school] all throughout the year and they are different year levels to begin with, so how is that going to logistically work? I don't have the answer – these are the things that we keep on just going around and we are trying to figure out and it's quite frustrating as educators, but at the same time it's heartbreaking to see these kids struggling, so I don't know.

(ESL coordinator)

Teachers indicated that they tried to develop strategies to resolve the frustration, to cater for student needs and to help support their integration into the mainstream. They claimed these attempts had met with very uneven success. Teachers spoke of students' refusal to do modified work,

insistence on doing the same tasks as other students and unwillingness to enter separate support programs. In one school, a number of Year 10 students had been identified to repeat Year 10 with significant extra ESL support in a limited range of mainstream subjects. Their chances of succeeding in Year 11 without this were considered to be zero. The ESL coordinator commented:

We are trying to do that to help them, but I guarantee that halfway through the year, we will be lucky if we have half a dozen kids left, and I can understand their frustration. They see it as a punishment and people trying to prevent them from getting on with their life and it's hard.

The Maths teacher stated that her Year 9 ESL students, some of whom were 'integration students' (special needs), were 'very stubborn' in their insistence on doing the mainstream work. We asked if Year 9 Maths was compulsory. She replied:

No, I could put them on a modified program – we modify programs for kids here all the time. But they refuse to do it. They won't do the modified work. They say I don't want it, I want to do the same thing. What can you do, you have to accept it.

From the above quote, we see that these groups of students are perceived as resisting programs that identify them as different or modified, and that the teacher's own sense of professionalism is also challenged. The comments reveal an intense dilemma for teachers. On the one hand, they wanted to devise programs to maximise the students' success. On the other hand, they understood the students' rejection of these as non-mainstream and a 'punishment'.

Overall, from the data in this section, we see challenges to teachers' professional identities. They raised questions about their own adequacy and control, their understanding of the students' needs and the level of support for both them and the students. All teachers in the focus groups suggested that they were dealing with a new situation in their classrooms.

TEXTS AND RESOURCES

A major difficulty for all mainstream teachers we spoke with was locating materials that were accessible to students aged 15 to 19 who had limited literacy. Associated with this was the inappropriate level of most mainstream textbooks, the work involved in adapting units and worksheets to several different ability levels, the problem of class sets of textbooks to which students had no home access, the lack of money in schools to buy more suitable resources, and expectations from teachers about the use of dictionaries. A text-rich subject like SOSE is a case in point. The two SOSE

teachers spoke of using simplified print materials, which ‘worked’ as an alternative to mainstream books. One said,

There are a couple of new books like *SOSE Alive 1* and *SOSE Alive 2* and this new one, number 3, that’s coming out and they’ve got matching booklets, and a multiple intelligence book. That’s what I have used with my Year 8s and that was fantastic, and I’ve even used some of them with my Year 12s (I shouldn’t tell you that!). And there is a lot of construction and model making, you know, but they are \$55 each for a thin booklet. I had to con the last principal to buy it for me.

(SOSE teacher A)

This is not an indictment of the principal but evidence that appropriate print materials need to be found and used, and that this will need funding. As the process of language acquisition is such a long one, particularly where schooling is severely interrupted, finding comprehensible relevant material for content subjects seems critical. The guilty secret of the Year 8 materials that work with Year 12s makes sense linguistically. Those in the second language acquisition (SLA) field are familiar with Krashen’s (1981) comprehensible input notion of $i + 1$, yet what we have in most textbooks used with these students is $i + 158$. The LA part of SLA is simply missing from the learning context in this case. In both schools the textbooks used were cognitively and linguistically too demanding for the students.

In addition, there is also a question of the students’ right to access printed materials both in class and at home. The Maths/Science teacher said:

The other thing is that they don’t have textbooks, because we don’t believe our clientele would want to buy science textbooks. We give them the Maths ones to use for a year, but the science department can’t afford to give them textbooks. But if they had textbooks there are words underlined; they could take more time in looking at the material at the back of the science textbooks; there are glossaries that they could use. And they could go home and sit and look over stuff and let it sink in a bit more.

Several teachers said that students only used class sets of textbooks, but they could borrow one – if they went to the library after school and returned it before 8.30 am the next morning. The question is whether this system is workable with students who are struggling with organisational skills. We asked if having their own books would make a difference. One teacher replied:

It would – because all of my ESL students ask me if they can take these home. Can I take these home, Miss, and sometimes I let them. I am not supposed to.

(SOSE teacher B)

The feeling was unanimous among teachers that having some ownership of the textbooks would help the students.

When they start using a book, they learn how to use a book, where the index is, it's helping them with process – just having a worksheet they can't really experience this, and it becomes a problem. (Maths/Science teacher)

That [textbooks] would help a lot in this school. It could help our normal kids as well. If you could get that, you could identify what was key learning and have it presented in ways that it was accessible. You know, if kids have their own textbooks you can ask them – you go home tonight, you read one paragraph for me ten times, you know, understand it, tomorrow I will ask you the meaning. The textbook will have pictures too. (Maths teacher)

Not only were there practically no textbooks for these students, but also teachers often had limited photocopying budgets and capacity to produce booklets, units and other support materials for students. Students often ended up with chaotic folders of tattered worksheets. Teachers' comments suggest that access to books would help both them and their students. Furthermore, books can be shared at home and pored over, and are vital to scaffold the development of literate practices.

There were conflicting views on the use of dictionaries. One comment was the following:

and the problem is, with science, how can you teach them ecology or evolution when they don't even know what is a male or a female, sperm or egg? You know it's so hard for us and I advise them to bring a dictionary with them. Only one girl brought it and the rest, no. They just kept asking me 'how do you spell this and what is the meaning of this', just all the time. (Maths/Science teacher)

Other teachers provided insight into why the other students didn't bring dictionaries. Although students literate in Arabic can use a bilingual dictionary, there is no Dinka–English dictionary currently available in Australia, and most students couldn't read a bilingual dictionary in any case.

A number of students this year, again for the first time that I can remember, have not been able to grasp how to use a dictionary, just throw it in the air and hope it lands on a page where 'v' might be. I've four Year 10s this year, I've had to write the alphabet up on the board most days when I go into the class, so the kids, when they are doing their work, can look up and see where 'f' might be and then we would put it against the word. But many students just flick around and just hope – they have very little understanding that the 'a' is first. (ESL coordinator)

I worked for the first semester with a number of students who were preliterate, two Year 10 students, and I spent virtually a semester trying to get them to recognise letters and sounds. I've taught a lot of kids who speak Arabic but couldn't read Arabic, so they can't use a dictionary, they can't use a bilingual dictionary. (ESL teacher B)

We know that vocabulary acquisition is critical in learning to read, and that teachers can't tell students the meaning of every word encountered, so accepting the status quo is not an option. Clearly for preliterate students this situation poses an enormous problem, but there are ways around it. Those ways cost money, and involve hunting for the right picture or beginner dictionary, and handing them over to students, together with scaffolded activities to learn to use the resources. As Lo Bianco (1998) stresses, osmosis is simply not going to work in helping students to participate fully in the learning process, or we would add in any aspect of language learning.

Conclusion

One of the goals of this research was to begin to describe the nature of educational experiences for refugee students in mainstream high schools in Australia from the perspectives of teachers who work with refugee students in their classes. The perspectives of teachers provide an important set of insights into the current educational provisions and practices relevant to these students, as well as insights into the particular responses and needs of these teachers. In their views, the various issues of teaching these students in mainstream high school subjects include: dealing with trauma and complex social, cultural and relational changes faced by students; seeking to meet the literacy and communication demands in classrooms; funding appropriate and accessible texts and resources; and developing modified programs which are accepted by students. Teachers in this study indicated that dealing with the needs and expectations of these students created a new and extremely challenging set of pedagogical dilemmas for them. In naming some of the problems, the research is seeking to begin to identify the starting points for addressing the problems faced by refugee students and their teachers in terms of both policy and practice. At the same time, in naming the problem, there is the potential to construct deficit views of students. The task as we see it is to avoid such negative constructions and rather begin to name the pedagogical strategies, professional learning needs and policy responses relevant to this critical situation.

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