

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Supported Students, Successful Students

Process evaluation of the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team – Final report

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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Executive summary

Reform background

In 2015, the New South Wales Department of Education (the department) introduced the Supported Students, Successful Students (SSSS) funding package. A key initiative within this package is \$4 million over four years to fund a new statewide counselling team of eight to support the wellbeing of refugee students. The team's core areas of work include: 1) capacity building through professional learning; 2) targeted counselling support for refugee students with complex needs; 3) advice and consultation to schools; and 4) developing local partnerships so that refugee students and their families are connected with other supports.

Process evaluation

This process evaluation answers the following key questions:

1. How has the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) implemented its four major focus areas?
2. What are the challenges faced by the RSCST?
3. Which aspects of the RSCST are working well, and which aspects are not working well?
4. What are the perceived improvements to the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
5. Have there been any unexpected outcomes?

The evaluation methodology was primarily qualitative comprising: 43 in-depth interviews with RSCST team members, school-based staff, Refugee Support Leaders (RSLs) and other providers of refugee services; development of four case studies to illustrate good practice; and review of activity data and self-evaluation data collected by the team.

Key findings

How has the RSCST implemented its four major focus areas?

The RSCST now has a well-established service model that has been refined over time. The team carries out activity in each of its four overlapping focus areas and activity in each area has increased steadily since the team's inception.

Capacity building has been the key priority for the team from the outset. This occurs through an array of professional learning workshops that the team has developed for different audiences. Team members have also built capacity effectively by working side-by-side with school counselling staff who have then applied these skills in their daily practice.

The team has spent an increasing proportion of its time providing **targeted counselling support** for refugee students with complex needs. Schools particularly reach out to the team for support with challenging and complex behaviours. The RSCST supports complex cases by working alongside school counselling staff, but in certain circumstances team members provide direct individual counselling support. The team also conducts group support work that is highly valued by schools. The overall feedback from schools has been very positive.

The RSCST provides **advice and consultation** concurrently with other support work, and also via a 1300 number that it established. The team has developed **strong local partnerships**, particularly with RSLs and the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), to provide coordinated and complementary services for refugee students.

What are the challenges faced by the RSCST?

During its establishment phase the RSCST faced challenges in recruitment and staffing changes. The team also experienced difficulties during the establishment of suitable office facilities and while setting up systems.

An ongoing challenge is the difficult nature of the RSCST's work which requires a combination of specialist skills and personal attributes that are not easily found. Setting up new team members to work effectively with schools is a long and involved process, particularly for those new to the department and new to working in schools. Hence any staffing changes require considerable additional work to orient and support new team members. The team leader retired at the end of Term 3 2018 and at the time of writing the role has not yet been permanently filled.

Expectation management is another key challenge. The RSCST is a small Sydney based team that provides specialist statewide support that is not available elsewhere. The team leader and team members have had to weigh up competing factors to determine how best to allocate the team's limited time. This includes considering the need for breadth of service to schools across the state, and depth of support for those most in need of specialist and time-intensive support. In some areas there is an unmet demand for the School Counselling Service (SCS) which heightens the demand for the RSCST and limits opportunities for building capacity to reduce that demand.

Finally, schools are at different stages of readiness for change and the team has had to adapt its approach to suit each school.

What aspects of the RSCST are working well, and what aspects are not working well?

Aspects of the RSCST that are working well are that: 1) they are valued for their expertise in an area of high need; 2) the team's reach has been broad in spite of staffing gaps; 3) the team's reach and influence has been extended by its focus on capacity-building and strong collaborative relationships; 4) the team leader has placed a high priority on team health, sustainability and quality service through mentoring and professional development, and 5) over time the RSCST has established self-evaluative practices for its different work streams.

We identified two aspects not working well. Firstly, schools' awareness of the team's specific responsibilities and range of services could be improved. Work is already underway in this area as the team has new information materials to provide clear and consistent messages about the team's services, and raising awareness is one of the team's 2019 priorities. Secondly, a minority of schools reported that they needed more time from the RSCST to address their support needs. This highlights that persistent gaps in the team's staffing have reduced the potential reach of the service, and that there will be an ongoing need to manage expectations.

What are the perceived improvements to the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?

We heard widespread examples from school staff of observed improvements in refugee students' social and emotional skills, such as better regulation of emotions and behaviours, more positive interactions with peers, and increased confidence in help seeking. These improvements were described in tandem with a reduced incidence and intensity of negative behaviours and an increased readiness to learn. Sometimes changes were small, and interviewees recognised that bigger changes would be a longer term process. The team has also started collecting pre and post data for individual and group interventions. A case study of a group intervention that the team has documented identifies reduced stress as a key outcome as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Regarding students' families, we heard several examples of perceived improvements to wellbeing, stemming from increased trust and confidence in school staff and a strengthened relationship with the school.

The RSCST's work is highly tailored, and the specific nature of wellbeing outcomes is particular to each context. Our case studies provide detailed specific examples of improvements to wellbeing as they relate to a particular setting and context.

Have there been any unexpected outcomes?

The most prominent positive outcome that interviewees felt was unexpected was improvement to staff wellbeing. Many school staff described feeling more confident and supported to put into practice the skills and strategies they had learnt. This was particularly true when staff needed support with students exhibiting negative and unsafe behaviours. Staff described positive benefits of feeling well-equipped to manage incidents that were previously quite stressful for them, and also having reduced exposure to these incidents. We heard that improvements to staff wellbeing were reinforcing and enhancing wellbeing outcomes for students.

Another unexpected outcome is the beneficial impact of new strategies and skills in supporting non-refugee students who had experienced trauma. This has extended the reach of the team's positive impact.

Future considerations

The RSCST has achieved positive wellbeing outcomes for refugee students in many schools in a relatively short period of time. The team should be commended for the quality and scale of support it has provided in challenging circumstances. The team has delivered widespread capacity building initiatives with members of the SCS, teachers and school staff. Their expertise in trauma-informed practice is particularly highly regarded and sought out. They have developed strong collaborative relationships with RSLs and with STARTTS that have improved the set of services available to schools and to refugee students. Demand for the RSCST's services is increasing, and efforts to change practices in some schools will be a gradual process, so the need for support will continue for some time.

Recruitment activity to permanently fill the team leader role (following the previous team leader's retirement) will take place for the third time at the end of 2019. This is a very difficult role to fill, requiring highly specialised skills and experience.

The information gathered in this evaluation indicates that the key area for the team to attend to is communication of the nature of the RSCST's work, and how it can work with schools. The team has already identified awareness building and communication as a priority for 2019, and team members are using new information materials when they meet with schools that aim to clarify and make consistent the messages provided about the team's services and ways of working. Updating and enhancing the information provided on the intranet (currently fairly sparse) is another planned activity that will help address this priority.

An ongoing challenge for the team, together with State Office, will be deciding how to prioritise the team's time. A number of those we interviewed were keen to know how much time an individual school could request from the RSCST. We heard some examples of schools with very large populations of refugee students, with support needs that exceeded the time that the RSCST was able to provide to a single school. Some schools had experienced a disruption to their counselling service which had elevated their refugee student support needs. A number of interviewees felt that a greater presence in regional areas was needed. Weighing up all of these factors against the available number of staff is a difficult balancing act, as is managing expectations of the level of support that can be provided. Another factor that will influence workload and prioritisation decisions is the conclusion of funding for the RSL positions in 2019. At the time of finalising this report the RSCST team was developing new strategies to adapt to this change.

1. Introduction

Supported Students, Successful Students funding package

In 2015, the NSW Department of Education (the department) introduced the Supported Students, Successful Students (SSSS) funding package, which commits \$167 million over four years to counselling and wellbeing services, as part of the National Education Reform Agreement (NERA)¹. SSSS aims to support schools to promote student character and wellbeing, help create safer school environments, counter inappropriate behaviours and more effectively engage with vulnerable students. New resources under the initiative include:

- \$80.7 million to employ an extra 236 full-time equivalent (FTE) school counsellors and/or school psychologists.
- \$51.5 million of Flexible Funding for Wellbeing Services equivalent to an additional 200 Student Support Officers (SSOs).
- \$15 million to support schools to implement a comprehensive and inclusive whole school approach to Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) – funding that will employ an additional 36 PBL executive positions including 4 deputy principal PBL positions and 32 PBL coach mentors.
- \$8 million to support Aboriginal students and their families.
- \$4 million to support refugee students and their families.
- \$8 million for graduate scholarships to boost the recruitment of staff for the School Counselling Service (SCS).

SSSS is complemented by the Wellbeing Framework for Schools², which articulates how the department will support and improve student wellbeing through the interconnected themes of Connect, Succeed and Thrive.

SSSS extends the range of services and initiatives that the department provides to support wellbeing in schools, such as Learning and Wellbeing Coordinators, Liaison Officers, Student Wellbeing Support Officers, Schools as Community Centres projects, the National School Chaplaincy Program and Healthy Canteens.

Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST)

The SSSS initiative provided \$4 million to establish the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST; formerly the Refugee Student Support Team) to provide specialised support to NSW public schools that have refugee students enrolled. The four major focus areas of work include:

- building the capacity of all school staff through professional learning
- providing face-to-face counselling or collaborating with school counselling staff to provide targeted interventions to refugee students and their families
- providing advice and consultation to ensure schools have timely responses to queries regarding refugee students
- developing local partnerships with educational services staff, and other government and non-government agencies to connect refugee students and their families to other supports.

The funding provided for staffing of 8 FTE school counsellors or school psychologists. To meet the eligibility criteria team members were required to have assessment and counselling skills applicable to a cross-cultural context, and experience providing psychological and therapeutic interventions that improve learning and wellbeing for children and young people from refugee backgrounds.

The RSCST is intended to work in a complementary manner with Refugee Support Leaders (RSLs), who support NSW schools to meet the needs of refugee students and their families as they transition to school. From 2017 to 2019 there were 19 RSLs in 15.4 FTE positions.

¹ For details on the NERA, see: http://www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/national_agreements/past/national-education-agreement.pdf.

² For details on the Wellbeing Framework, see: <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/wellbeing/about>.

Refugee students in NSW public schools

Australia's 2015 commitment to resettling 12,000 refugees from Iraq and Syria, in addition to the existing Humanitarian Program intake, led to a significant increase in refugee enrolments in NSW schools in the following years. For example, approximately 3,200 refugee students enrolled in NSW schools between June 2016 and June 2017.

There are now more than 8,000 students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in NSW public schools. Approximately 1,500 newly arrived refugee students enrol in NSW public schools each year³. In 2019 approximately 600 schools in NSW Public Schools had refugee students enrolled, including approximately 390 primary schools. These schools are located in each of the department's operational directorates across the state. Numbers change regularly as new refugee families arrive and as other refugee families move to different locations.

Refugee students are in a new country with a different language, culture and systems. They generally require high levels of support to enable them to settle successfully in school, learn English, and access the full curriculum. Many refugee students have also experienced trauma which can lead to difficult and distressing psychological, social and physical consequences.

Provisions in NSW public schools to support refugee students include:

- intensive English tuition on arrival
- bilingual support
- specialist counselling support
- targeted transition support
- ongoing English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) education and,
- parent and community engagement strategies.

The department also provides evidence-based professional learning, support and resources to help teachers meet the immediate and ongoing educational and wellbeing needs of refugee students.

A key challenge for schools in determining how to best support refugee students is the complexity of Australian visas. Students and their families may be on a refugee or humanitarian visa, or they may be an asylum seeker who is awaiting notification of approval of refugee status. All of these students will receive a range of health and wellbeing supports on arrival to Australia. Students on a refugee visa, however, will receive more support from agencies and services than students on a humanitarian visa who are supported by a sponsor. Students who are asylum seekers will not receive the additional support that students on a refugee visa receive until their status has been approved for a protection visa. Recent changes have meant that some asylum seekers whose cases have been determined are able to stay in the country with work rights but without health or social services benefits.

Current evidence on the effectiveness of refugee student support programs

In reviewing the existing literature on the effectiveness of refugee student support programs, we identified the following common difficulties:

- The relationships that explain how refugee student support translates to improved student wellbeing and long term academic outcomes is complex and opaque.
- There is much diversity in refugee student populations in terms of the number of origin countries and cultures within a school, the age and previous school experience of refugee students, and whether they are experiencing other factors of disadvantage, such as poverty and isolation.
- Refugee students may be receiving support from programs for students from culturally diverse backgrounds, backgrounds other than English or newly arrived families, which make it difficult to know which program or combination of programs is most effective.
- There is limited centralised data on student wellbeing, meaning that evaluations typically draw on self-report data.

3 Statistics provided at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/multicultural-education/refugee-students-in-schools>.

Two recent relevant evaluations of refugee student support programs in Australia include the evaluation of the Victorian Schools Support Program (McCaughey Centre, 2011)⁴ and the evaluation of the second round of Victoria's Refugee Education Support Program (Nous Group, 2015)⁵. McCaughey Centre (2011) reported that the whole school approach of the Victorian Schools Support Program led to improvements in wellbeing and educational outcomes for students with a refugee background and non-refugee background. Nous Group (2015) concluded that Victoria's Refugee Education Support Program resulted in a range of benefits that may be largely sustainable for schools and students. However, the only publically available documentation is a brief executive summary, and this does not identify specific evaluation measures.

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- 4 McCaughey Centre, University of Melbourne (2011). Schools Support Program Evaluation Final Report. <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/mccaughey-centre-university-melbourne-schools-support-program-evaluation-final-report-november-2011/>
Also cited as: Cross S, Block K, Riggs E and Gibbs L. (2011). School Support Program Evaluation Final Report. McCaughey Centre, University of Melbourne; November.
- 5 Nous Group (2015). Refugee Education Support Program: Evaluation Report. http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/RESP_Nous_Evaluation_Report_Executive_Summary_20151202.pdf

2. RSCST process evaluation

The Learning and Wellbeing Branch within the department invited the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) to evaluate the SSSS funding package. We developed the evaluation scope collaboratively and iteratively with Learning and Wellbeing.

In total, we are evaluating four components of SSSS:

1. The expansion to the School Counselling Service (SCS)
2. The Positive Behaviour for Learning (PBL) approach and new positions provided to support the implementation and expansion of PBL
3. The allocation of Flexible Funding for Wellbeing Services
4. The Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST).

Evaluation questions

The RSCST process evaluation addresses the following questions:

1. How has the RSCST implemented its four major focus areas?
2. What aspects of the RSCST are working well, and what aspects are not working so well?
3. What are the challenges faced by the RSCST?
4. What are the perceived improvements to the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
5. Have there been any unexpected outcomes?

Method

We applied a qualitative methodology to answer the evaluation questions, which included in-depth semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholder groups, development of four case studies to illustrate good practice, and review of the RSCST activity database and self-evaluation data captured by the team.

Semi-structured interviews

We conducted 43 interviews with a range of department staff (RSCST staff, school based staff that had engaged with the RSCST either briefly or extensively, and RSLs) and staff from external agencies (representatives of the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors and NSW Refugee Health) described in Table 1.

Table 1:

Interviews undertaken for the evaluation

Groups/Individuals interviewed	Number of interviewees	Number of interviews conducted
RSCST staff	9	14
School based staff: • Eight principals • Three deputy principals • Two assistant principals • Three school counsellors • One school psychologist • Two senior psychologists education • Four English as an additional language or dialect teachers • One classroom teacher	24	19
RSLs	6	6
External agencies • Three representatives from NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) • Three representatives from NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)	4	4

Case studies

We have included four case studies as successful examples of different ways in which the RSCST supports NSW public schools refugee students. We chose the case study topics in consultation with Learning and Wellbeing and the RSCST.

The case studies provide illustrations of:

- complex case support and classroom teacher capacity building;
- the benefits of play therapy;
- supporting a new regional refugee settlement area, and
- RSCST's collaborative working relationship with STARTTS and the benefits for schools.

We sent the draft case studies to those who participated for their feedback, prior to inclusion in this report.

RSCST activity database and self-evaluation data

We have reviewed the RSCST activity database and have produced summaries of descriptive statistics regarding the nature, range and volume of support that the team provides to NSW public schools. We have also reviewed de-identified self-evaluation data that the team has collected with regard to its professional learning activities.

3. How has the RSCST implemented its four major focus areas?

This chapter discusses the RSCST's establishment of its service model and how it has implemented its four major focus areas:

- capacity building through professional learning
- providing targeted interventions to refugee students and their families
- providing advice and consultation and,
- developing local partnerships to connect refugee students and their families to other supports.

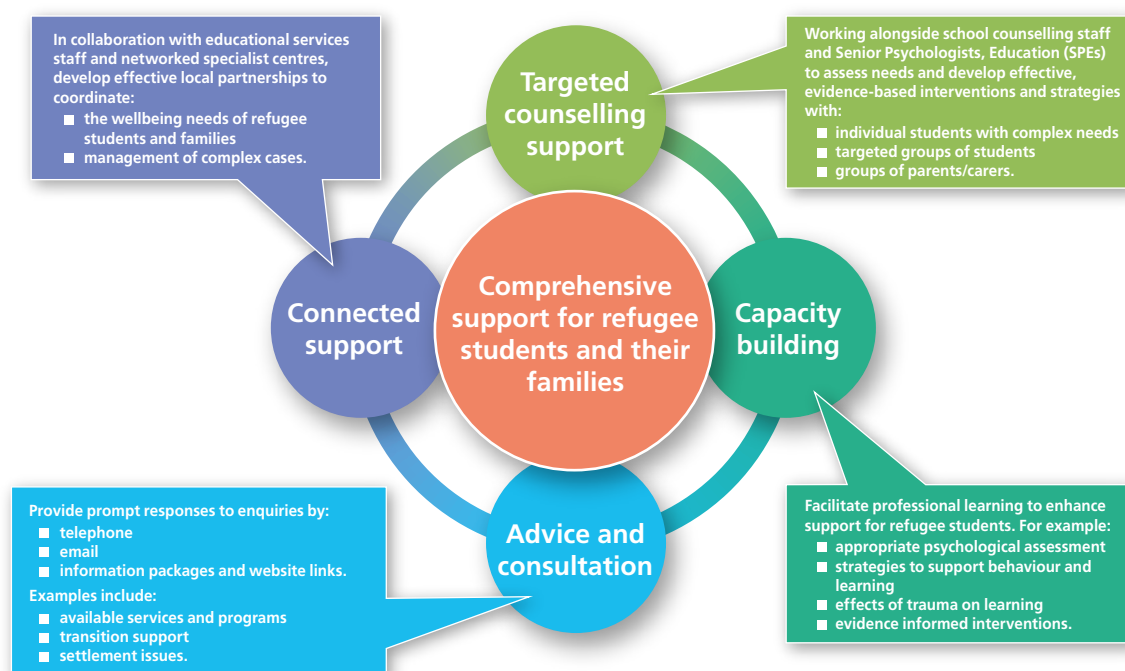
The RSCST now has a well-established service model that has been refined over time

Learning and Wellbeing established the RSCST in Term 1 2016 by appointing two team leaders and identifying the four major focus areas as the team's broad remit. In the ensuing months psychological and wellbeing services (within State Office) invested considerable time recruiting six new team members and developing a service model for the team based in two Sydney metro locations.

To meet the eligibility criteria team members were required to have assessment and counselling skills applicable to a cross-cultural context, and experience providing psychological and therapeutic interventions that improve learning and wellbeing for children and young people from refugee backgrounds. Those recruited to the team (initially and subsequently) had wide experience in schools, or in other settings such as the (then) Juvenile Justice NSW, the Commonwealth Department of Home Affairs, NSW Health, and non-government agencies working specifically with refugees.

An important part of the model was the early establishment of a 1300 phone number that is manned during school hours to centralise requests for support. A key question then for the team leaders to grapple with was where and how to prioritise the team's time to greatest effect. Factors they weighed up included the absolute number of refugee students in a school, the proportion of refugee students within the total school population, the level of experience the school has in working with refugee students, and the extent to which the school is receptive to support. They also had to consider the competing needs of breadth of service to schools across the state, and depth of support for those most in need of specialist and time-intensive support. Over time there have been some refinements in thinking as the team has become more established and better known.

Figure 1:
RSCST Service Model



“The question is that I’ve bought up at meetings is well how are we most effective? ... Are we most effective working at [location] where 90 percent of the school are refugee background? Saying that, they’re actually coping quite well because they’ve done that for 20 years. So are we better at working in a school, and we have worked in schools, where there’s one refugee?” [Team leader]

Figure 1 is the service model diagram that team members finalised in 2018, which depicts the team’s areas of work and how they connect together.

From the second half of 2018 the team was embedding and documenting ways of working, including documenting training packages for counsellors and teachers, developing a team manual and procedures document, and setting up procedures for monitoring and self-evaluation.

There is significant overlap in the four focus areas and the team’s activity has increased steadily over time in each area

The RSCST is carrying out work in each of the four focus areas, with an overarching focus on trauma-informed practice. Team members explain that the four focus areas are interwoven and that school engagements typically involve more than one type of support.

“So it’s really never one thing when you walk into a school. It’s a combination of all the four areas that we might work, so there’s the up skilling that goes on all the time, every time we interact with people.” [Team leader]

The team’s activity database provides a broad indication of the nature and break down of the team’s work as it captures information on all of the team’s requests and activities. However, team members advise that statistics can be hard to interpret for three reasons: 1) only one category for each request is recorded, even if more than one type of support is provided; 2) the time entailed in each engagement is highly variable (from a few minutes to many hours), and 3) some changes have been made over time to the way the information is recorded.

At a broad level the database statistics paint a clear picture of the growth in the team’s activity over time in each of the four focus areas. The statistics also indicate a shift to relatively more work in the capacity building (from 27% in 2016 to 38% in 2018) and targeted counselling areas (from 7% to 17%), and relatively less work in the advice and consultation areas (52% to 36%). The database statistics indicated no key differences between the nature of support requested by primary and secondary schools.

At the time of writing the team advised that they had been able to respond to all requests thus far and that they had not yet had a need to establish a waitlist.

Table 2:

RSCST database statistics on focus activity areas over time

Focus areas	2016	2017	2018	2016	2017	2018
	count	count	count	%	%	%
Capacity building	35	124	159	27	41	38
Advice and consultation	68	104	150	52	34	36
Targeted counselling	9	45	70	7	15	17
Connected support	20	33	38	15	11	9
Grand Total	132	306	417	100	100	100

The team also produces a snapshot summary of the work they are doing each term. The snapshot differs from the database information because it tallies all of the team’s different activities, rather than categorise an engagement into one focus area. The snapshot for Term 2 2019, presented in Table 3 overleaf, indicates the large volume of work the team is conducting in providing consultations, complex case work, training, counselling support sessions, direct counselling, regional visits and project work. Note that the number of consultations recorded here is much higher than that indicated in the database. This is because consultations are often a secondary activity to another focus area of support and so are captured as another focus area in the database.

Table 3:RSCST Term 2 2019
snapshot of activity

Term 2 2019	Number	Description
Consultations	301	General information; clarify what other types of support are needed; connected support; confidentially discuss individual cases; ongoing complex case support
Complex cases	38 active/ 17 closed	Building capacity to provide trauma aware assessment, support planning and intervention through discussion, modelling, practice and feed-back
Training sessions	45	The refugee journey and impact of trauma on wellbeing; behaviour and learning; STARS in Schools: promoting safe relationships and development through play, self-care
Counselling support sessions and training	22	Delivering training to build the capacity of school counsellors/ psychologists to develop appropriate counselling approaches/ skills in working with refugee or asylum seeker populations
Direct individual/ group counselling sessions	7	Individual counselling sessions; implementing group programs with School Counsellors/ Psychologists/ STARTTS
Regional visits	14	Days supporting schools in refugee settlement areas: Armidale, Coffs Harbour, Wollongong, Newcastle, Albury/Wagga Wagga
Project work	93	Initiate, provide advice or participate in special projects and initiatives with schools and other service providers to develop resources for a specific purpose or review resources used to support students of refugee backgrounds
Other (meetings, networking etc.)	45	Meetings with DoE refugee networks including Refugee Support Leaders, external services and others

Focus area 1: capacity building through professional learning

Capacity building is the key priority for the team

Building the knowledge and capacity of NSW school staff to recognise and appropriately respond to the wellbeing needs of refugee students has been a key focus for the RSCST since the team's establishment in 2016. Being a statewide team with mostly 5.5 FTE staff (it did not reach its full complement of 8 FTE), the team leader recognised that the most efficient way to build capacity was through professional learning. More recently though, staff estimate that they currently spend an equal amount of time building capacity by working side-by-side with school counselling staff to provide targeted interventions.

The RSCST offers an array of professional learning workshops to different audiences

The team recommends and/or tailors its professional learning workshops to the prior knowledge and experience of the target audience. Professional learning workshops are most commonly delivered to SCS staff and classroom teachers, but also to school executive staff, specialist and support staff, school administrative staff, refugee students at NSW public schools and on occasion, other government organisations.

"We've spent a lot of time delivering professional learning to Senior Psychologist Education and counsellor groups, to give them ideas about just really what we can do. Because it's a new service people need to actually be shown ways to see how we could complement the service that already existed within the school, or within a region." [Team leader]

The most widely delivered professional learning has been S.T.A.R.S⁶ (Safety, Trust, Attachment, Responsibility, Skills), a four module workshop that educates school staff on the refugee experience, impact of trauma and, how to foster positive learning environments for refugee students. Unlike some of the other professional learning workshops, S.T.A.R.S can be implemented by any trained facilitator providing there is someone with a counselling background in the room to offer support to attendees, where necessary. Over time, the RSCST have trained RSLs and school counsellors to co-deliver S.T.A.R.S. RSCST staff comment that this has both broadened the reach of this workshop, and recently enabled the RSCST more time to deliver more specialised workshops.

Examples of other workshops the RSCST deliver include: therapeutic limit setting and the window of tolerance; psychometric assessments for refugee students; promoting safe relationships and development through play; behaviour and learning; reflective listening, and self-care for staff members who work with refugee students and their families.

These workshops are delivered by the RSCST both upon request and as a proactive initiative for new refugee settlement areas. For example, through their collaboration with RSLs, the RSCST learnt that Armidale would be expecting approximately 50 school aged refugees within a six month period.

6 https://beta.dec.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/277864/STARS-in-Schools-T4-Flyer.pdf

Together, the RSCST and the local RSL advocated for all school based staff to receive a suite of professional learning workshops. To date, the RSCST and the local RSL have delivered tailored S.T.A.R.S sessions to school counsellors, classroom teachers and administrative staff. The RSCST has also delivered therapeutic limit setting and the window of tolerance sessions to school counsellors. Further, the RSCST and STARTTS delivered a full day of training for school counsellors that explored the culture of the main refugee group entering the area, acculturation challenges, psychological assessments for refugee students, and culturally sensitive and trauma-aware ways of supporting students and families. Case Study C in Chapter 7 discusses this work in more detail.

The majority of the school staff that we interviewed reported positive feedback regarding the professional learning workshops that had been offered and/or delivered to them. This is consistent with the self-evaluation data that the team has gathered. For example, following 13 sessions of professional learning that the team delivered to 171 staff members between February and June 2019:

- 98% agreed that “the presentation provided me with information I will be able to use in my work”
- 94% agreed that “the presentation was structured well”
- 87% agreed that “the presentation was engaging”
- 99% agreed that “the presenter/s were easy to understand”
- 99% agreed that “the presenter/s were able to provide further examples and clarification when needed”

In interviews, school staff made particular mention that the training was appropriately tailored to their needs, it was informative, engaging and they were able to make clear links back to their students.

“It’s interesting when I finally hear it in the context of kids I’m specifically working with as opposed to the general overall umbrella, I’m able to make those connections a lot easier.” [School counsellor]

“It’s [Play therapy workshops] been really positive. It’s also given counsellors another way of looking and working with children, because sometimes, because of the language issues and because of the difficulties of being in a therapy context with these children, it provides another way of being able to build that therapeutic relationship with them.” [SPE]

Interviewees also provided positive feedback regarding the knowledge and skills the RSCST has imparted regarding trauma informed practice. Team members provide schools with a holistic perspective on wellbeing, an understanding of how the school environment impacts on refugee students and their families, and how to foster a more supportive environment. Training in play therapy has played an important role here and is sought out by counsellors and schools. For example, the RSCST delivered two two-hour training sessions to a team of school counsellors, school psychologists and SPEs in one area. This training was very well received, and counsellors have been applying these strategies in practice, and there has been interest in follow-on professional learning.

“That was really helpful to the team, because it gave us a little bit of insight into some of the therapeutic approaches and the theoretical approaches around play therapy and how it can assist refugee children. Also, it was good, because we had some practical experience developing some of those skills that you need in a play therapy context. It’s one thing that the team’s always had an interest in, trying to get some professional development in that area, particularly when working with refugee children and children with trauma. So that was a great opportunity, yes.” [SPE]

A minority of school staff however, were not as complimentary and their feedback suggests that perhaps there were some communication barriers in tailoring the workshops to the target audience.

The RSCST has also built capacity by working side-by-side with school counselling staff

In addition to building capacity through professional learning, an increasing proportion of the RSCST’s work is building capacity through side-by-side counselling support work with school counsellors. We discuss this work under focus area 2.

Focus area 2: providing targeted interventions to refugee students and their families

Requests for targeted counselling support, complex case consultation and behaviour support have increased over time

RSCST staff report that requests for targeted counselling support were infrequent early on but have been growing steadily over time. This is also supported by the database statistics provided in Table 4 below, up from 6 in 2016 and 2017 to 159 in 2018. Targeted counselling support is time intensive and in 2018 staff estimated spending an equal amount of time on capacity building through professional learning and on targeted counselling support.

Table 4:

RSCST database statistics on nature of activity over time

Nature of activity	2016	2017	2018	2016	2017	2018
	count	count	count	%	%	%
Complex case consultation	6	6	159	4	4	38
Training/ Professional learning	32	32	108	21	21	26
Short consult	93	93	46	61	61	11
Meeting/Networking	20	20	40	13	13	10
Other	1	1	33	1	1	8
Project/Initiative	0	0	31	0	0	7
Grand Total	152	152	417	100	100	100

The shift over time appears to have come about primarily through a growing awareness of the range of services the RSCST can provide. Initially the role of the team in relation to targeted counselling support for complex cases was not clear and some schools commented that they did not think this was a part of the team's remit. Awareness of the full extent of the services the RSCST can provide has improved through engagement with the team during professional learning workshops and/or discussions with their RSL.

"The information that we were provided is that the refugee counselling team weren't able to do casework. ... We didn't think that we could access that team for one student." [Principal]

Targeted counselling support requests include both complex case support and group interventions for students who have behavioural, social, emotional and/or academic problems associated with having experienced significant trauma and absence from education. The team database indicates that the nature of issues being encountered is increasingly behavioural. Of all issues encountered across work areas, 5% were categorised as behavioural in 2016, 29% in 2017 and 29% in 2018. These statistics are presented in Appendix B.

Working side-by-side with school staff is a key priority in supporting complex cases

The RSCST commented that working side-by-side with the SCS is a key priority for the team when supporting complex cases. This is important for building the capacity of the existing school staff and reducing the need for ongoing support from the RSCST.

In general, this includes engaging the relevant school counselling staff when a request for support is received and encouraging them to shadow or be mentored to lead meetings involving school staff, the student, family members, interpreters and relevant external services.

"She [RSCST team member] attended but she also helped me lead those meetings. We had two and those meetings were quite intense, they were two hours long each. And she really facilitated I guess the way the questioning, the way we sort of addressed the concern, the referral concerns in a really gentle way because I've never really worked with a refugee family before, so she really taught me – she taught me heaps about trauma but she also taught me about how to create rapport in a meeting and how to ask questions in a really gentle manner." [School Counsellor]

From there, RSCST staff and school counselling staff work side-by-side with teachers, family members and relevant internal and external services on the development and implementation of case plans. The RSCST indicated that depending on the needs of the student, case plans may require appropriate psychological assessment or a broader holistic assessment (to gauge medical, educational and psychological wellbeing), safety and/or reactive and proactive behaviour plans, or counselling. While psychological assessments are a key service provided by the SCS, the RSCST provides specialist knowledge and skills regarding suitable assessment tools, language and cultural barriers, and trauma-informed care. Holistic, culturally appropriate assessments with refugee students and their families are very time intensive and RSCST staff note that that school counselling staff often require additional training and support to implement these.

When implementing reactive and proactive behaviour plans, the RSCST and school counselling staff involve and upskill teachers and families to ensure the consistency of care across settings. The RSCST explains trauma and shame and how this translates to behaviour, and then develops alternative skills to respond to that behaviour. Case Study A provides more information on the development and implementation of behaviour plans (Chapter 7).

“The gentleman [RSCST staff member] that came in was vital in helping us write learning plans, proactive and reactive plans. Functional behaviour assessments were undertaken, and he certainly built capacity in the school to be able to do that. So we now have a team of teachers who, if other students arrive, we would be able to do that for, which is vital.” [Principal]

RSCST staff explained that their involvement in counselling sessions depends on the level of experience of the counselling staff member, but typically the RSCST will mentor the counsellor for four to six sessions. They also support school counselling staff through peer supervision and case consultation.

“We work alongside the school counsellor for a number of sessions, mentoring them for say four to six sessions and then eventually we let that school counsellor take the case over and we take a step back ... we slowly withdraw and monitor the conclusion of that case to a satisfactory level.” [RSCST team member]

The RSCST provides direct individual counselling support in certain circumstances

RSCST staff explained that from time to time, working side-by-side with the SCS is not feasible or appropriate, and in these instances, the RSCST directly provides complex case support. Examples of where this might occur include if there is a significant shortage of school counselling capacity at the school or if the student or family specifically request that the SCS not be involved. In these situations, the RSCST mentioned that it is important for them to consider how much time they are able to provide to support an individual student, as well as the implications for the student if the case is handed over to the school counsellor or a STARTTS counsellor, and how to manage this transition.

Group support work is also highly valued by schools

The RSCST has also conducted group support work, either on request or through their own suggestion during discussions with a school. The team leader explained that this type of work was growing and is often completed in collaboration with the local RSL and/or STARTTS member.

The ‘Mosaic’ is a group program the RSCST has developed for refugee students aged 10 to 12 years (refer to Appendix C for more details). It is an eight week therapeutic intervention consisting of verbal processing of past experiences and creative arts to address mental health issues related to trauma. It is accompanied by information sessions for parents. The program is in pilot phase and the RSCST has run it twice so far. The program is facilitated by an RSCST member, with a school counselling staff member participating as an observer. There is a focus on building the capacity of the school counselling staff member to be able to run the program themselves at a later point. The program targets students who were not prioritised for individual therapy due to high demand. The RSCST has captured feedback from students participating in the first pilot program and this indicated that students were utilising the coping strategies that Mosaic had taught them. Further evaluation will follow.

Another example of group support followed a request from a primary school with a large number of refugee students. The young age, language barriers and trauma experiences of the students caused staff to reach out to the RSCST for support. Consequently, a weekly play therapy group was established by the RSCST for two terms. Subsequently, a play based group was also implemented by RSCST, school staff and STARTTS. School staff referred students to play therapy or the play based group for reasons ranging from being withdrawn from others to displaying aggressive social behaviours. During the play therapy sessions, students were provided the space to explore a safe and unintimidating environment filled with a range of sensory motor play and messy exploratory play stimuli. The RSCST member leading the sessions explained that the aim was for students to develop positive attachment relationships and the emotional literacy and social skills critical for adjusting to school life. Case Study B (Chapter 7) outlines some of this work in detail.

“Children who have trauma histories who survived a war have not been to pre-schools, they’ve not had all those lovely early learning experiences ... So a lot of their developmental needs have not been met.” [RSCST team member]

The great majority of feedback about the targeted counselling support has been positive

Specifically, interviewees mentioned the following benefits:

- having access to a team with specialist skills in refugee counselling
- being supported in dealing with a new and challenging situation
- gaining new knowledge and strategies regarding trauma informed practice and,
- having the opportunity to build capacity in an embedded way.

“That’s shifted that particular teacher’s mindset in terms of how she would work with that particular student, and that was something that was really powerful that the refugee counselling team were able to work through with us. That wouldn’t have come through any understanding through staff and what have you, so that’s why it’s so invaluable what they’re doing at the moment with this whole, we’ll come, we’ll share with you, and then we’ll work with you about how to put that into practice.” [Principal]

Some school staff, however, felt that they did not receive as much support as they needed to address their needs. These concerns are explored more in Chapter 4.

Focus area 3: providing advice and consultation

Advice and consultation is provided concurrently with other support work, and also via the 1300 number

The advice and consultation that the RSCST provides to schools often occurs when delivering professional learning workshops and supporting with complex cases. The team also has a 1300 number that can be called during school hours for short-term over the phone support.

Common examples of requests for advice and consultation include, visa queries, how to organise an interpreter, appropriate external services, clarification that school staff are implementing appropriate strategies and supports and, enquiring as to what support the team can provide. Consultations also include all conversations that take place once a complex case has been opened.

“We provide one-off advice over the phone so somebody might have a visa question or something we can just take care of in the moment and so we might do that. Sometimes people need advice on a where to from here. So they might tell us a bit about a case and then try and figure out which services might be most appropriate, so we can deal with that either on the phone or we can go in and have a meeting with them and talk about that.” [RSCST team member]

School staff and staff from external services provided complimentary feedback about the RSCST advice and consultation service.

“They’ve [the team have] helped me out a lot in my role. I’ve been able to call them when I’ve needed to talk to them about particular issues.” [RSL]

“Every time that we’ve needed to call them or ask them to respond to something, they have been able to – so I would say ‘yes’ [we’re satisfied].” [Principal]

Focus area 4: developing local partnerships to connect refugee students and their families to other supports

The RSCST has developed strong partnerships to provide a coordinated and complementary set of services for refugee students

RSCST staff report that they have invested considerable time in developing strong collaborative partnerships with internal and external refugee service providers, in particular RSLs, and STARTTS. The initial RSCST team leaders commented that many of these partnerships had been facilitated by the strong relationships that they had developed over their careers prior to joining the RSCST.

Common ways in which the RSCST collaborates with these services include co-facilitating or attending STARTTS Liaison Program network meetings, co-developing and delivering professional learning and collaborating on complex case support and group interventions. The key benefit of these collaborations is a coordinated and complementary set of services for schools and refugee students.

RSCST staff explain that network meetings, initiated by STARTTS, allow them to spread awareness about who they are and how they can partner with other services, and also keep them informed of refugee developments and activities in the area. In addition to the RSCST, RSLs, STARTTS and Refugee Health, network meetings are hosted and frequently attended by representatives from local schools, Family and Community Services, Settlement Services International and the Red Cross. Network meetings are particularly beneficial in rural areas as they provide local schools the opportunity to discuss their respective resources and to make contact with external services that may not be based in town.

The way in which the RSCST works with an RSL depends on the geographical area and knowledge and experience of the RSL. In general though, an RSCST staff member will touch base with the local RSL on a regular basis to keep updated on refugee needs and to plan the delivery of services within the area. The RSCST has worked collaboratively with RSLs to deliver S.T.A.R.S and the two services will often co-deliver other professional learning workshops. Requests for support are often received via the RSL. In 2018, referrals from RSLs made up 31% of all referrals to the RSCST. In instances in which the request has been made directly by school staff, the RSCST will involve the local RSL.

“Where we really complement each other, is that we come together when there’s a complex case. And the Refugee Support Leader can come and look at it from a curriculum perspective, we come with the psychological perspective and work then with the school and the learning and support team to really nut out what we can do to provide support to this young student.” [RSCST team leader]

The RSLs that we interviewed provided very positive feedback about the work the RSCST is doing, the relationships that have been built between the RSCST and RSLs (at a team level and individual level), and the complementary way in which the teams are working together.

“It’s kind of like a safety net I suppose for me supporting schools to know that I can suggest schools that they make contact with around particularly challenging issues. And yeah, I think they’re very complimentary to the RSL team.” [RSL]

The external service that the RSCST works most closely with is STARTTS. Interviewees from both teams commented that the two services have a consistent approach to the way they think about and support refugee students that have experienced trauma. As such, the two services commonly collaborate on complex cases and group interventions where trauma is a significant factor. Case Study D in Chapter 7 provides further detail about this working relationship.

“That team offers that kind of experience and expertise that’s not really readily available, that I haven’t really seen widely demonstrated.” [STARTTS representative]

“I think together we’re stronger.” [STARTTS representative]

4. What are the challenges faced by the RSCST?

In this chapter we discuss the challenges in implementing the RSCST. This includes challenges that are typically faced in establishing a brand new team, and those more specific to the nature of the work undertaken by the RSCST and the service delivery context.

In setting up a brand new team the RSCST faced challenges in recruitment, staffing changes, facilities and systems

In its early stages the RSCST faced a number of challenges that are common when establishing a new team. Firstly and perhaps most significantly, the recruitment process for filling the temporary positions with employees who had responded to an Expression of Interest (EOI) was lengthy. Several staffing changes also took place before these positions were made permanent in 2017, and the team structure changed at that time from two team leaders to one. RSCST staff and staff from external services commented that the service lost dedicated and skilled workers during this time and that the changes were disruptive to the support work in schools.

“I mean I think that’s the problem with the department more generally that you’ve got people on EOI’s they develop all these skills and they have all these expertise and they have to go back to school twelve months later, or even three years later. You can’t really make significant changes in that time. ... Next year we’ll just be losing a lot of expertise.” [RSCST staff member]

Further, team members experienced difficulty in the establishment phase, with an office space that was unsuited to their needs, practical and logistical constraints in accessing pool cars for regular travel, and difficulties with new or developing IT systems. Team members commented that by 2018, many of these initial challenges were resolved and consequently expressed greater satisfaction with their day to day functioning.

An ongoing challenge for the team leader, that is common in many SCS teams, is managing staff on the two different awards that cover school counsellors and school psychologists. The two awards have different benefits and limitations and these nuances add some complexity to the team leader’s role.

The RSCST’s work is difficult and requires a set of specialist skills that is not easily found

The challenging nature of work carried out by the RSCST should not be understated. At times team members are meeting a school when it is in acute need for support for its most traumatised students. Expectations regarding the nature of support, results and speed of results can be high, but progress with students in this situation can be gradual. Further, there is ample literature that highlights the vicarious trauma that can be experienced by those who support others who have experienced trauma.

The set of skills, experience and personal characteristics required to carry out the work effectively is not commonly found. On a number of occasions recruitment activity has been unsuccessful. During 2017 and 2018 the team functioned with an average of 5.5 out of 8 FTE staff, and this placed increased pressure on existing team members who were working hard to meet demand. At the end of Term 3 2018 the team experienced further staff changes with the long serving team leader retiring. Two recruitment rounds to fill this position permanently were unsuccessful, and the leadership uncertainty during this time was unsettling for the team. Temporary relieving arrangements have been in place since that time, and will remain in place until the end of 2019.

Fortunately at the start of 2019 two new members were successfully recruited to the team, taking the team complement to more than 7 FTE.

The orientation process has many layers and is necessarily lengthy

Multiple team members have been new to the department and to working in schools, having built their expertise in other government agencies and service delivery roles. Their on-boarding and orientation process has entailed learning about: working in a new role in a new team providing a new service; departmental policies, procedures and processes; how to work effectively in schools, and how to work effectively in specific schools taking into consideration local priorities, policies and existing knowledge and expertise. The team leader has established multiple mentoring and peer support processes to ensure they are equipped to support schools effectively and independently. This layered and involved process means that it takes some time before the team is working at full capacity.

“I’m new to this department, so it has been quite a steep learning curve for me, in terms of procedures and policies and how everything works and operates. So, it’s quite a lot to get your head around if you’ve never worked in the department. And, so my first couple of months were really just trying to do the mandatory training, getting my head around the policies and paperwork ... my team leader placed me at different schools for me to observe some counsellors to see, just to get a flavour of how the schools operate, because every school is different as well. And, every role is different and requirements and dynamics and all of that, so I’ve learned that as well.” [RSCST staff member]

The team leader has had to weigh up competing factors to determine how best to invest the team’s time across the state

The RSCST is a small Sydney based team that provides specialist statewide support that is not available elsewhere. The team leader and team members have had to weigh up competing factors to determine how best to allocate the team’s limited time. This includes considering the need for breadth of service to schools across the state, and depth of support for those most in need of specialist and time-intensive support. Travel logistics must also be considered as the team is Sydney based.

In 2019 approximately 600 schools in NSW Public Schools had refugee students enrolled. These schools were located most commonly in the department’s operational directorates of Metropolitan North (approximately 190), Regional South (approximately 160) and Metropolitan South (approximately 155). Smaller numbers of schools with refugee students were located in Regional North (approximately 45), Rural South and West (approximately 35) and Rural North (approximately 20). Numbers change regularly as new refugee families arrive and as other refugee families move to different locations.

The unmet demand for the SCS in some areas has heightened the demand for the RSCST and has limited opportunities for capacity building

Demand for the RSCST is heightened in areas where demand for the SCS exceeds capacity. Options for capacity building in this situation are limited, which leads to a reliance on the RSCST. Sometimes needs cannot be met. For example, the principal of a large school with a large refugee population described an acute need for counselling services and the school did not have its core counselling allocation filled. This school had received a lot of highly valuable support from the RSCST, but staff still felt frustrated and dismayed by the level of unmet need.

“In a school of this extreme need, you need somebody to be a minimum of two days a week, so the effectiveness of communication is there, so you’ve got time to consult, you’ve got time to go through, if not case notes, make recommendations around things the school can know and then do something with in the classroom.” [Principal]

Schools are at different stages of readiness for change

A key point raised in interviews across stakeholder groups was the variability amongst schools regarding their readiness to change and/or allocate funding toward providing the necessary supports, particularly in circumstances where students are displaying challenging behaviours. A mindset that the RSCST seeks to shift is that there is a problem to fix regarding an individual student’s behaviour. Rather the team seeks to impart and understanding amongst staff that certain styles of interactions can trigger psychological distress and self-protective behavioural responses. When this is occurring, systemic changes to interactions may lead to better outcomes for all.

Two RSLs described occasional instances of school staff perceiving the presence of the RSCST to be a criticism of their current practices and capabilities.

"I guess they feel very much, [they] have a lot of commitments and ownership around supporting that group of students. And I think it might have been seen as that they weren't managing as well as they should have been." [RSL]

RSCST staff also mentioned that they have worked with school staff who were unable to consistently and effectively implement their advice and recommendations as they were experiencing stress as a result of their interactions with students in distress. This situation extends the time and level of support required to effect change which can sometimes cause staff to become frustrated by the lack of immediate change.

5. What aspects of RSCST are working well, and what aspects are not working well?

We have identified several aspects of the RSCST that are working well and less well through interview feedback and consideration of the service context.

Aspects that are working well

The RSCST is valued for its expertise in an area of high need. Its reach has been broad in spite of staffing gaps, and its focus on capacity-building and strong collaborative relationships extends this reach further. The team has benefited from the leader's emphasis on team health, sustainability and quality practice through mentoring and peer professional development. Further, the RSCST has established self-evaluative practices over time which team members use to improve their different work areas.

RSCST members are valued for their expertise in an area of high need

The significant need for the RSCST, and how highly valued the teams expertise in the refugee experience is to schools, were common themes across interviews with all stakeholder groups. Team members are carrying out highly challenging work that requires a diverse and distinct skill set and their professionalism and resilience is applauded by those who work with them.

"I think we would have been at a loss if we didn't have something like that [RSCST] to lean on. ... You've got your year advisors, you've got your deputies, you've got me and other people in the school but we're not trained to deal with these issues." [EAL/D teacher]

"They have that expertise that I think is much needed in schools ... I think that their expertise in that area [complexity and uniqueness of refugee trauma] is really good. Probably one of the strongest features of the team. Their perspective on wellbeing and on how much the school environment impacts individual students and families. And working to foster a more supportive environment." [Representative from external refugee service]

The RSCST's high level of expertise enables them to be able to adapt their services to meet the needs of the school and/or students rather than providing a 'one size fits all' service. Further, the team's rich background within refugee support services enables them to assess the level of support that a school requires rather than relying solely on what is being requested.

"They are extremely professional and knowledgeable people, and they're all from different backgrounds within refugee services, and I think that's a strength of the team." [Representative from external refugee service]

"There's a great deal of flexibility in the role which I think is good and key. If you actually are going to provide the best support you can you need to meet the school where they're at and tailor something to meet their needs." [RSCST team member]

The team's reach has been broad in spite of its staffing gaps

The database statistics presented in Chapter 3 demonstrate the increasing volume of work carried out by the RSCST over time across its four key areas. In 2018 the team had an average of 5.5 FTE and it supported 82 separate schools. In Term 2 2019 the team provided 301 consultations, supported 38 complex cases, delivered 22 training sessions, provided 7 direct individual or group counselling sessions, spent 14 days visiting schools in regional areas, initiated or supported 93 special projects and attended 45 other meetings and events.

The majority of school staff and staff from external services are satisfied with the support the team has provided in all four focus areas. All RSCST staff members were pleased that they had typically been able to respond to each request for support in a timely manner and had not yet needed to create a waitlist. In some instances, the RSCST has also been able to proactively support school communities that were due to receive a large influx of refugee students, although they would like to be able to do more of this proactive work with schools.

“We really have been able to respond to the requests made to us by schools pretty promptly. There hasn’t been any undue delays, unwanted delays because of, say, shortage of resources or shortage of team members.” [RSCST team leader]

Part of their success in responding to referrals in a timely manner has been the intake process and 1300 number. A team member gathers detailed information at intake and (non-urgent) cases are reviewed collectively at a fortnightly team meeting and allocated appropriately. Once a case is allocated, the relevant team member develops and implements a case support plan and participates in review meetings. The result is an effective and equitable intake process.

It is important to note, though, that awareness of the team’s services is still growing, and so the number of referrals underrepresents the statewide need for specialist support.

The focus on capacity-building and strong collaborative relationships extends the team’s reach and influence

Capacity-building is at the heart of the team’s engagements with schools and this is enabling schools to support future students and is reducing a reliance on support from the RSCST.

The team works highly collaboratively with the other refugee services available within and external to the department and these working relationships are very beneficial to all involved.

The team leader has placed a high priority on team health and sustainability, and on quality practice through mentoring and peer professional development

The team leader that was in place from 2016 to 2018 prioritised building a collaborative, cohesive and supportive team environment. This has been important because of the structural changes experienced by team members and also because of the sensitive and traumatic nature of the work.

During interviews, RSCST staff noted how valuable they find the support that they receive from their team members. They explained that the RSCST fortnightly team meetings are a great mechanism for discussion the services they have been providing, for sharing ideas and concerns, and also engaging in reflection and continuous learning through peer professional development.

“I think we collaborate as a team well now. Our team meetings are great, they’re efficient, and we get to address a lot of things that we need to address in the two weeks between when we first and last see each other; and now we’ve got some really great group supervision going on. So we’re being supportive for each other, and helping even build capacity within ourselves.” [RSCST team member]

Recently appointed team members also expressed their gratitude for the mentoring opportunities that they have received. Specifically, team members that do not have school experience are placed within a school context one day a week for up to 6 weeks to shadow a school counsellor. Team members that do have school experience will shadow other team members during school visits for a similar period.

“These are quite complex cases, especially in the beginning, so you really need somebody to introduce you to how things are done and what is appropriate to do and what is not appropriate to do. So, I’m doing that at this stage. I’m still going out to schools with more experienced staff. And, I actually, I just got two cases that I’m now tackling on my own, but you always kind of have somebody at the background just bouncing off the ideas.” [RSCST team member]

Over time the RSCST has established self-evaluative practices which are used to improve the different work areas

As part of the process of tailoring professional learning workshops to the audience, RSCST members explained that they gather information regarding the content knowledge and skills of the intended recipients. Similarly, the team delivers short surveys at the end of professional learning workshops to determine whether the attendees felt as though their knowledge, confidence and ability to work with refugee students has improved. Team members commented that they reflect on the responses and endeavour to improve their practices with each professional learning workshop they deliver.

By 2019 the team had broadened their self-evaluative practices to other work areas including complex case work and side-by-side capacity building work with school counsellors. For complex case work this involves setting goals and measuring them at the outset and the end. The team often uses the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)⁷ to measure changes in emotional symptoms and behaviours. For side-by-side capacity building work, the RSCST has developed a self-rating survey to discuss with the individual at the start and the end of the support, to assist in identifying areas of learning to focus on, and to see how the self-ratings change following support. The team has also developed a feedback survey with items relating to the quality of the support provided⁸.

"I've introduced an idea to the team where when we set up work with a clinician, with a psychologist for example, we sort of get a setup for them in the beginning, then at the end of our work with them that we're going to be sending them a survey about our performance in terms of supporting them. So we'd ask questions like, "I felt supported and challenged by the refugee support team member. They provided me with relevant information" etc. So it's kind of about them feeling that we do care about the level of service that we provide and it enables us to know what we can do better next time." [RSCST team leader]

Team members commented that more brainstorming is needed to determine how best to embed self-evaluative practices into their advice and consultation service and local partnerships with external services.

Aspects that are not working well

We have identified two aspects of the RSCST that are not working well. Firstly, schools' awareness of the range of services that the RSCST provides could be improved. Secondly, some schools felt that they needed more time from the RSCST. This highlights that persistent gaps in the team's staffing have reduced the potential reach of the service, and that there is a continued need to manage expectations.

Awareness of the RSCST's specific responsibilities and range of services could be improved

Our interviews with school-based staff indicate that further work is needed to increase awareness of the RSCST and the range of services that the team provide. While not a common response, some interviewees did mention that despite having large populations of refugee students at their school they had only recently heard of the RSCST.

"As a fairly high needs school, I only came across Refugee Student Counselling Support Team fairly recently. It wasn't something that I had an awareness of which surprised me because that was my initial question, was how do I not know about this service when we utilise most services that help us with our refugee families." [Principal]

Further, several interviewees found it difficult to differentiate the roles and responsibilities of the RSCST, RSLs, STARTTs and other school-based roles that support refugee students. Other interviewees commented that while they know that the RSCST support schools with refugee students, they are uncertain about the range and extent of services that their school can access from the team.

"I'd like a little more clarity around the service itself and details around exactly what we can have and how regularly you could have that. Perhaps hear a little bit about how the service is being utilised in other places. In terms of case managing things, how does all of that work and how regularly can you use that service or what happens once we refer a student." [Principal]

⁷ Goodman, R (1997). The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note, *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 38, 581-586

⁸ For example, one of the items is "The RSCST team member helped me achieve good outcomes with the student/family"

"All I know is that they're a group of either school counsellors or psychologists who are working together to support refugee students. I don't know what, whether it's - is it just about mental health, is it about education, academics? That I'm still unclear about." [Principal]

For the RSCST, the number of existing refugee supports already in place made it harder to raise awareness and communicate the nature of the work. In addition there was some confusion amongst schools due to the similarity in names of the Refugee Support Leaders (RSLs) and the (then) Refugee Student Support Team. The addition of the word 'counselling' to the team's name at the end of 2017 has helped to clarify this distinction. Another factor impacting on awareness was that finalising the team branding and associated communication materials was a gradual process while the service model was being refined.

"Yeah we've changed our name. I think that has helped and it is - I think as we go along the road and have more and more things to do within schools they are much more clear about what we do and what other agencies do and what sometimes we can do together and things like that. Some of these things, I think, for people to get their heads around it takes time." [RSCST team leader]

Since the end of 2018, however, the team has finalised and started using an information flyer to support their initial meetings with schools. The intent is to provide a clearly documented and consistent message regarding the team's range of services. Raising awareness is one of the team's strategic priorities for 2019.

The team also continues to communicate their work via mail outs, presentations at network meetings, and via Directors, Educational Leadership (DELs). They have also distributed the service delivery model to Leaders Psychology Practice (LPPs) and Senior Psychologists Education (SPEs). Further, the State Office team regularly discusses the team's work with LPPs, during principal network meetings, senior executive meetings and the induction process for school psychologists.

There is some limited information about the team available on the intranet, and this could be updated to reflect the information flyer.

Some schools felt that they needed more time from the RSCST. This highlights that persistent gaps in the team's staffing have reduced the team's potential reach and that there is an ongoing need to manage expectations.

During interviews, some school staff and one RSL commented that the RSCST needed to be more available to provide more effective support. School-based staff from two separate schools commented that the RSCST would need to dedicate more time at their school for the support in relation to targeted interventions to be able to extend teacher knowledge and/or current management strategies.

"I don't know if there was enough dedicated time with the RSCST and teachers to go much further than that, to go much further than those strategies that are already happening. ... And like I said if the visits were probably more regular and more ongoing perhaps we could get there but it's just not." [Principal]

One school that received play therapy as a group intervention commented that timing constraints in delivering the intervention meant that students that were deemed in need of support over a period of more than two terms could not be selected. This meant that some higher need students did not receive the group intervention⁹.

One RSL and some school staff explained that they had difficulty scheduling a date for the RSCST to visit their school for professional learning and/or targeted intervention support. Some RSLs also argued that having regional offices would make it easier for the RSCST to provide timely support and to build relationships through more face-to-face contact.

"If a school has a crisis with a student, which has happened on quite a few occasions here in the last six months. If someone was local, they'd be able to respond as you would in any critical incident in the school, which is straightaway, but they can't do that sort of response and that's a problem." [RSL]

"It would be better to have some positions, even if they weren't full-time positions based in regional areas. ... It's never ideal to be trying to have things outreached from Sydney ... if they were here, they could build a relationship with the school counsellors who are in the schools here and be much more effective." [RSL]

⁹ We heard from the RSCST that this was due to uncertainty about whether the play therapy could continue for more than 2 terms. This meant that the RSCST needed to select students that could benefit from the therapy within this timeframe and would not be negatively impacted if it had to stop after 2 terms.

6. What are the perceived improvements to the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?

This section of the report draws on the reflections of multiple stakeholder groups regarding perceived wellbeing outcomes. Outcomes for refugee students include improved social and emotional skills, reduced negative behaviours, increased confidence, and increased readiness to learn. Outcomes for students' families include strengthened communication and relationships with the school. We also discuss wellbeing outcomes for school staff.

The specific wellbeing impacts of the RSCST's work are particular to context and take time to realise

The RSCST is one element of a system of supports that contribute to the wellbeing of refugee students and their families. The work carried out by the RSCST can be specific or broad depending on the particular needs of the students involved and the circumstances of each setting. Improvements to the wellbeing of refugee students with complex traumatic backgrounds are very rarely immediate and the outcomes achieved may not be consistent across contexts. The sections below describe outcomes in a broad sense, while Case Studies A to D in Chapter 7 illustrate specific outcomes in specific settings.

School staff have observed improvements in refugee students' social and emotional skills and increases in confidence

School staff have noted improvements in refugee students' social and emotional skills following complex case support, group intervention work and in some cases staff professional learning. For example, school staff reported that some refugee students are able to more effectively regulate their emotional response to situations they perceive as threatening, interact more positively with their peers, and appear more confident in seeking the help of others.

"I can see that she's [refugee student] a bit calmer, she's not as reactive or as – she's retaining a little bit more information, she's being a little bit nicer to her friends." [School counsellor]

"I have noticed students just feel more confident in asking for help. They don't feel so alone, so isolated. I think that's the biggest difference." [Principal]

The RSCST has also supported many refugee students who are in a transitional stage: from primary to high school, and from high school to post-school destinations and their siblings who remain at school. In these circumstances, school staff report that the students who are transitioning appear more confident about the changes ahead and also that their siblings who remain at the school appear less anxious.

"There are cases where students become more confident in terms of transition year six into year seven, in particular, that we've been supporting some students for their transition. And we're also working with the younger siblings who become very anxious and distressed when the older brother, in particular, going into high school and they are going to be left behind in the primary school, and issues like that. Or parents being very anxious about the children being split, and the child going into high school. So we see great improvement in terms of preparing children for high school and preparing the families as well for high school, for their child to attend high school, and for the younger siblings to be more confident about being able to stand on their own feet without the older brother looking after them." [Team leader]

The RSCST has started routinely collecting pre and post SDQ data for group intervention work and for complex cases (via the staff member that they support). Preliminary results from five complex cases are as follows:

- In all five cases the staff member reported that the student's problems were better since coming to the RSCST - 'a bit better' in four cases, and 'much better' in one¹⁰.
- In four out of five cases the staff member reported that coming to the RSCST had been 'quite a lot' helpful in other ways (eg providing information or making student behaviour more bearable). In the fifth case the rating was 'only a little' helpful¹¹.

One of the team members has documented a case study (see Appendix C for details) of a ten week play intervention she delivered with ten students aged seven, in collaboration with a STARTTS staff member and EAL/D classroom teacher. To assess results she administered the SDQ pre and post intervention, video recorded the sessions and interviewed the classroom teacher. Some of the documented results include:

- by session 10 most children had shifted from solitary play to pretend play¹²
- children showed decreased anxiety through increased risk taking, trying new things, asking for help and joining in
- pre and post group SDQ data indicated a decrease in overall stress
- the teacher developed positive relationships with students.

She explained that these types of positive outcomes are typical in the intervention work she has conducted.

"So all of those goals I think out of all the children I've seen, and I've run 160 sessions this year, there was one individual goal that didn't change so pretty much every other goal improved. It's really wonderful actually." [RSCST team member]

We note that due to privacy reasons we have not viewed the documentation of these outcomes ourselves.

There is a reported reduction in negative behaviours and increase in readiness to learn

Many school staff and RSLs commented that they observed a reduction in the incidence of negative and unsafe behaviours following their engagement with the RSCST. It was further noted that when incidents did occur, the negative impact that those behaviours had on staff and other students was reduced. Several interviewees explained that they were grateful to the RSCST for their expertise as previous responses to these incidents had been ineffective, and at times inflammatory.

"Where we look at where the child came from in January to now, we have seen significant improvement in terms of behaviours." [Principal]

"Just already with this program [Play Therapy] that is being run with the Year 2 students, the classroom teachers are seeing a difference already with the students. We're seeing that the negative incidents, there's been a decrease. It's upskilled our teachers in how to deal with the students in the class, the different ways of how to speak with the students, competency to feel that they can change the way that they do play, so that its more effective and is going to cater for the needs of those refugee students." [Principal]

¹⁰ "Since coming to the service are the child's problems...? Much worse, A bit worse, About the same, A bit better, Much better"

¹¹ "Has coming to the service been helpful in other ways, eg providing information or making the problems more bearable? Not all, Only a little, Quite a lot, A great deal"

¹² Play skills develop in stages, beginning with solitary play, moving through to pretend (co-operative) play and are well developed by age 5. Traumatic experiences and reduced opportunities can interrupt this development.

Some interviewees also noted that, with time, their refugee students who had worked with the RSCST appeared to be more settled in the classroom and were displaying behaviours consistent with a readiness to learn.

“He’s happy, and he’s ready to learn now. At the beginning of the year he just was refusing to do any schoolwork. I think that’s part of - I think- I wasn’t really sure how to work with him because he just wasn’t ready to work ... we’ve kind of got things in place now so that when things do happen, he knows what to do and the teachers in the school know what to do. But definitely his attitude has changed. He’s ready to work, he’s ready to – he’s not showing as much defiance.” [EAL/D teacher]

However, some staff commented that their school is not adopting the strategies that were recommended by the RSCST and this is limiting the positive student outcomes that could be achieved.

“The Refugee Student Counselling Support Team has provided a behaviour plan to the school. It is still not implemented by staff, despite my best efforts. ... With relevant school staff members, a joint constructed behaviour plan for his key misbehaviours was written and shared with all relevant staff. The plan is highly relevant and would be easy to use.” [EAL/D teacher]

The RSCST has strengthened many relationships with families

Several school based interviewees commented that working side-by-side with the RSCST has helped them to learn more effective ways of communicating with the families of refugee students. In many instances this has led to families developing trust and confidence in school staff thereby strengthening their relationship and enabling holistic support for the refugee student.

“We were able to deal with it without damaging relationships, so they still felt supported and that family could still feel engaged with our school and could move forward. So that would be the thing that I would highlight the most.” [Principal]

“Dad was saying, you know, “I should be grateful that I’m in this country, I’m safe now. Why do I need counselling?” But throughout our discussions he then concluded and said, “I can’t believe how much I’ve needed to talk about this. I didn’t know I needed this and I’m so grateful that you have brought to my attention the services that exist that can support me and my kids. Because again I was also depressed, I had started to disconnect from my kids, I didn’t know how to help them. I was helpless.” [School counsellor]

School staff describe feeling more confident, equipped and supported and they articulate changes they have made in their interactions with refugee students

Importantly, many school staff have reported an increase in their understanding, ability and confidence in how to support refugee students, including how to prevent and manage difficult situations. These staff reported that they have changed their practice to include the strategies and approaches recommended by the RSCST and are consequently observing changes in the behaviour of their refugee students. Many staff also reported applying the same knowledge and skills to support other students that have experienced trauma and have seen equal benefit in doing so. Further, staff commented that they feel they have a greater awareness of how to access support, and feel reassured in the knowledge that there are others that can support them.

“As far as teaching staff, we’ve all built capacity in managing children with trauma, whether that is from a refugee background or trauma for other reasons.” [Principal]

“Just a growing awareness for our team in terms of where they can go outside and how much they can do and how much they can access independently of that group too, if they can’t get them.” [Principal]

Impacts on staff wellbeing are most evident at schools that have needed support with students exhibiting challenging and at times, violent behaviour. Case Study A describes the positive impacts on the classroom teacher's wellbeing and reduced stress levels, following the complex case support provided by the RSCST.

"I think the surprising thing that's come out of that is that there has certainly been a shift in teacher practice, particularly in the Year 2 classes, in the way that they respond to the students." [Principal]

Representatives from other refugee services also spoke of the positive impact the RSCST had had on the support that is available to schools, and the increased awareness within schools about trauma, vicarious trauma and self-care.

School staff describe unexpected positive outcomes for staff and for other students that have experienced trauma

Some school staff noted that they had not expected that the work of the RSCST would bring about improvements to staff wellbeing. Further, some school staff were also very pleased to be able to apply the skills and strategies that they learnt by working collaboratively with the RSCST to support non-refugee students who had experienced other types of trauma.

"We first accessed the support to assist this one particular student. However, he [RSCST member] built the capacity of our staff to administer functional behaviour assessments and write both reactive and proactive behaviour plans, and that is now being used to support other students who have experienced trauma, but not from a refugee background. So it's actually built the capacity within the school, which we weren't expecting." [Principal]

The wellbeing outcomes for students and staff are mutually reinforcing

Interviewees explained that improvements to staff wellbeing have positive flow on effects for the families of refugee students with respect to strengthened relationships. In turn these positive outcomes reinforce the outcomes for refugee students and also benefit other students in the classroom.

7. Case studies

Case Study A: Complex case support and classroom teacher capacity building

Introduction

The name of this school has been withheld to ensure student privacy is maintained. The Centre for Education Statics and Evaluation (CESE) would like to thank the principal, assistant principal, classroom teacher, school psychologist, Refugee Support Leader (RSL) and Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) member who contributed to this case study.

This case study illustrates effective and collaborative complex case support and capacity building initiatives at a school located in a major city of NSW. It describes the wellbeing outcomes and the factors that contributed to effectiveness.

Background

The setting is a small primary school in a major city of NSW. There are less than 250 students and 45% of students are learning English as an Additional Language or Dialect. The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) indicates that the school has a slightly higher than average level of disadvantage.

When refugee students first arrive at school families are assigned a caseworker through an external agency who liaises with the school and assists with language barriers. Refugee students often require financial support with items such as school uniforms, a school bag, and other school equipment. For refugee students who have limited English language skills, the school has an English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) program to help them build these skills. A number of refugee students have been through significant trauma and the school recognises that supporting their wellbeing is critical.

Engagement of the RSCST

The RSCST was initially contacted by the local RSL, whose role it is to facilitate the settlement of refugee students and their families. The RSL was aware that the school had 50 refugee students, including 12 who enrolled at the school at the beginning of 2017, and so understood the school may require additional support. The RSCST then made contact with the school to explain what services the team could provide.

Nature of support provided by the RSCST

Initially, the RSCST provided two professional learning workshops to staff members regarding trauma informed care, general support that can be provided to refugee students and self-care. The school then requested specific assistance regarding a complex case involving a young student who had recently commenced at the school. The student was experiencing a range of wellbeing, behavioural, psychological, and social issues and was displaying frequent challenging and sometimes violent classroom behaviours. The school had a very experienced school psychologist allocated to the school one day a week, but this was not enough to support to an individual student with significant needs. The RSCST's support with this individual case included capacity building and professional learning for school staff, as described in more detail below.

Targeted counselling support

The member of the RSCST and the local RSL initially met with the student's classroom teacher and the school psychologist to discuss practical strategies that would help in the classroom. Over a period of time, the RSCST member developed reactive and proactive behaviour plans in collaboration with school staff and the RSL, and support was provided to implement these plans in class.

The first key support was to develop a reactive behaviour plan that would be implemented at times when the student's behaviour placed themselves and others at risk. This plan was developed through a half day workshop that was led by a second member of the RSCST who specialises in reactive behaviour plans and trauma-informed therapy. The workshop was a collaborative initiative involving the two RSCST members, the classroom teacher and other teaching staff, the school psychologist, and the RSL. The process was guided, so that staff could learn how to develop the reactive plan themselves. The completed plan provided a step-by-step procedure for the classroom teacher to follow when there was a safety critical situation.

After developing the plan, the RSCST member spent one day per week in the classroom over the term in order to observe the plan in action, to support the classroom teacher and school learning support officer in its implementation, and to assist with any required modifications to the plan.

Once the reactive behaviour plan was in place, the RSCST member worked with the school psychologist to develop a proactive behaviour plan. They met with both the student and the mother and developed a plan for the student's long term goals regarding positive behaviour. The first step of the proactive behaviour plan was to map out the setting, triggers and behavioural responses that had been observed. From there, the main themes in the student's behaviour were identified as well as the function of the behaviour (that is, the message that the student was trying to communicate). When these were identified, the focus was on communication skills and replacing any challenging behaviours with positive alternatives. Many of the strategies focused on removing stressors for the student and developing the student's play skills. This was facilitated by the RSCST member sourcing some culturally appropriate resources for the student to use. After putting this proactive behaviour plan into action, the student's capacity to participate with the entire class gradually increased.

Strengthening relationships with the family

The RSCST member participated in a number of meetings with the school psychologist and the student's mother to help strengthen their relationship and to build trust. The school also changed its approach to communicating with the mother by appointing just one staff member as the key contact, which reduced confusion for the mother and improved communication.

Capacity building through professional learning

Engagement with this school began with a RSCST member delivering two professional learning presentations to all staff about the refugee student experience and the impact of trauma on learning. Although the staff had previous experience with refugee students, this broadened their understanding about the learning implications and consequences of trauma.

Capacity building via targeted counselling support

All of the work undertaken by the RSCST in support of this complex case was done collaboratively with teaching staff and the school psychologist, with an emphasis on capacity building. After participating in these processes and then putting them into practice, a number of staff members had the ability and confidence to develop proactive and reactive behaviour plans for other students.

Outcomes

Reduction in problematic behaviour

The reactive and proactive behaviour plans were very effective tools. The reactive plan provided a clear guide for managing the situation without emotion, enabling the teacher to carry out the reactive plan calmly. This had a flow-on effect to the other students who would also remain calm, which in turn would make the situation easier to manage. Having the RSCST member present in the classroom provided reassurance to the teacher that there was back-up support in carrying out the plan, if required. Over time the proactive plan was successful in reducing the frequency of incidents, until they became very infrequent.

The school had previously discussed whether a regular classroom setting and mainstream schooling was best for this particular student or whether the student would benefit from attending a behaviour school. However, following the successful implementation of the reactive and proactive behaviour plans, the student stayed on at the school and is participating successfully in the next year of schooling.

Increased staff capacity to support refugee students

The school psychologist and a number of teachers now have the skills to develop reactive and proactive behaviour plans. The processes for developing the proactive and reactive behaviour plans and the end product were more in-depth and targeted than the learning plans and risk assessments with which the school was familiar. The school psychologist has subsequently extended this approach so that reactive and proactive behaviour plans are now developed for all students with complex needs, and this is reflected in the school's refined wellbeing policy.

The professional learning therefore broadened the knowledge and understanding of trauma and its implications for learning for all staff members present.

Improved student and staff wellbeing

The wellbeing of the individual student that was supported improved as evidenced by improved social skills and behaviour. Subsequently, the reactive and proactive behaviour plans that have been developed for other students with complex needs, have resulted in a broader positive impact on student wellbeing.

The support provided by the RSCST also significantly improved the wellbeing of the classroom teacher. Previously, she had experienced regular highly stressful classroom events when none of the behaviour management strategies she attempted were successful.

Improved relationships with family members

The school's relationship with the mother of the student improved following the support provided by the RSCST in collaboration with the school counsellor. Previously, the mother did not like being at the school and would not attend meetings with school staff. Now, the mother feels comfortable enough to drop in to the school and say hello to the principal.

Enabling Factors

Capacity building at the centre of support provided

The RSCST typically aims to reach as many individuals as possible through professional learning. However, in this case they focused initially on one specific case, and then used this as a way to build capacity. Through their targeted intervention for this specific work they were able to build the capacity of all the staff involved. These newly acquired skills have since been utilised to support other refugee students and students with complex needs. This work has also led to discussions about other work that may take place with a particular group of students that require additional support.

Commitment of school staff and openness to ideas

The staff at the school were very willing to work with the RSCST to develop and implemented targeted support for the complex case. They were very receptive of the suggestions offered by the RSCST and devoted a great deal of time and effort to the case. The school counsellor worked extensively in developing the behaviour plans and the classroom teacher persevered in extremely challenging circumstances. The school leadership team communicated a clear message throughout the school that they supported the work of the RSCST.

Collaborative approach

A collaborative approach was utilised throughout. The school was introduced to the RSCST by the RSL who was familiar with all of the schools in the area and their refugee student support needs. The school support services that worked collaboratively with the RSL and RSCST to support the complex case included the school counsellor, case workers, teachers and the executive. Classroom teachers also often engaged in team teaching which meant that during challenging situations additional support from other teachers was always available.

Case Study B: The benefits of Play Therapy at a large urban public school

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) would like to thank the school principal, deputy principal, assistant principal, and Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) member for their valuable input into this case study. The name of this school has been withheld to maintain student privacy.

Introduction

This case study describes how a large urban public school has achieved improved outcomes for refugee students, particularly those affected by trauma, using play therapy delivered by the RSCST. In particular this school has been using, first, one-on-one play sessions, and later group play sessions to assist the development of wellbeing and achievement in refugee students who have experienced trauma. The school also took advantage of the RSCST to upskill staff, particularly teachers, in the use of play as a tool for helping students learn, and for self-care when working with students who have experienced trauma.

Background

The school teaching staff includes a mix of highly experienced and early career teachers. The school's infrastructure is well developed, with contemporary learning facilities and landscaped playing areas.

The school hosts approximately 600 students from K-6, the large majority of whom are from language backgrounds other than English. Nearly 50 languages are spoken among the school's students.

The school endeavours to provide a safe, stimulating environment with a focus on active participation and learning. There is a focus on co-operative partnerships and this is reflected in all aspects of the school's organisation, planning, and programming.

School programs

Students in the school are supported through equity funding, which includes English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and community language programs. Equity funding also supports the school's breakfast club, numeracy programs, and student engagement activities. The school has also dedicated funding towards improving access to information technology (a dedicated computer lab, and all students have access to iPad and laptops), in addition to computers and interactive whiteboards in every classroom.

Student profile

A large number of students are from refugee backgrounds, including many recent arrivals, of which many have experienced torture and trauma. Some refugee students have not had previous schooling and education experiences and those that have, have had these experiences disrupted. Further, many arrive at the school with little or no English, and very often with no preschool experience.

On enrolment, the school identifies which visas students are on, and the levels of support they've received before coming to school. Following this, the school conducts a comprehensive induction interview with each refugee student and their family. The purpose of the interview is to understand what needs a student may have, and some insights into the level of trauma and disruption they've experienced.

Of the students who are not themselves refugees, many are from families who were refugees or who otherwise come from disadvantaged backgrounds. A history of low levels of education are a common feature of families of students in the school, and there are numerous examples of parents who have been living in Australia for long periods of time, up to 20 years in some cases, who still need interpreter support.

In response to the demands placed on the school to support its students, the principal has funded dedicated positions to support refugee students and general student wellbeing, as part of the school's leadership team. The school has also been recognised as leaders in the area of refugee support for its EAL/D program and the school's LAST program has been recognised for its innovative approach to student learning.

The refugee community

The school has quite a diverse refugee population representing many different countries and language groups. The diversity of the refugee students enrolled at the school, and the corresponding differences in their experiences and needs are a key challenge for the school.

While some students come from families with high levels of education – parents who are doctors, lawyers, and accountants – others are from families who have spent up to 20 years in refugee camps and whose parents themselves have little or no education.

The common thread is that all refugee students have had disrupted schooling, and many have experienced significant trauma. The impact of that trauma is not always obvious, and families are often unable or unwilling to discuss the experience, focusing instead on their current situation of settling into a new country, a new education system, a new culture and new language. Once they feel safe and trust has been developed, families feel more comfortable in disclosing experiences of trauma.

Play therapy

This school was selected from amongst a number of schools that the RSCST identified early on as possible sites for hosting play therapy for refugee students. The school counsellor recommended play therapy to the school as a very useful addition to the other programs in the school.

When first proposed, the school put together a list of students they believed would benefit from play therapy, and those students were assessed for need. Implementation focused on those students most likely to benefit from either 10 or 20 weekly one-on-one sessions with the play therapist¹³.

To support the play therapist, the school allocated a dedicated room that was purposely set up for the therapist to use throughout the program. This type of therapy is effective when students feel that they are safe, and the environment and the toys are safe. Providing a single ongoing location for the play therapy is a key step in establishing that “safe environment”.

At the beginning of the play therapy sessions a set of different play options are available to the students who are free to choose where and with what they played. It was very common for refugee students, independent of their age, to begin with “messy and exploratory play”: a pattern of play characteristic of very young children, usually those aged around two years. In other words, students of even six and seven were showing behaviour consistent with an earlier developmental stage. That pattern is consistent with students having had their development interrupted by trauma and loss.

As therapy progresses, the goal is to move students through the developmental cycle until they reach an age appropriate stage of play. For students of six and seven, the goal is for them to be able to “pretend” play; to understand narrative and learning, being able to predict what comes next in a story, comprehension, and so on. When they have reached that stage, and understand how to play for their age they can effectively learn and socialise in the classroom setting.

This pattern of one-on-one therapy was provided to 11 students at the school. All students responded positively to the therapy, showing improvements in social and academic behaviours.

Supporting play therapy

In addition to play therapy, the RSCST with the RSL and assistant principal delivered professional development to help all staff understand trauma and its impact on students and behaviour. Further, the RSCST provided training for staff to monitor and manage their own wellbeing.

During this time, the RSCST also worked one-on-one with stage one teachers to: i) help them implement elements of play therapy into their classroom activities and, ii) understand the context and behaviours exhibited by individual students so both teachers and the RSCST could develop opportunities to better support individual students and their needs.

As the skills and insight of the staff at the school developed, and as the RSCST became embedded into the school’s program, the RSCST expanded play therapy from only one-on-one sessions to include group sessions as well. In conjunction with NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) and another teacher, 10 students were supported at a time, allowing them to develop their play and social skills in a group setting.

¹³ The time-frames for support were constrained at the time to a six month period. This ruled out the selection of students that would require a longer time period for support, as it would be unethical for them to stop receiving support mid-way through. The RSCST selected students that they thought could move from moderate or high risk to low risk within 10 or 20 sessions.

Outcomes

Students

The outcomes for students that received play therapy manifested quickly, with a noticeable reduction in the numbers of behaviour-related incidents within the school for identified students.

Further, a student who displayed limited western communication skills is now looking at peers and teachers in the eye, and continues to develop English language skills, with support from the EAL/D team.

For example, the principal noted that a student who was initially sent to the office each day for misbehaviour was now only sent to the office a couple of times a term and for minor infringements. Indeed, the principal was seeing the child more often following play therapy for improvements in his learning, than for behaviour infringements.

Teachers

Another outcome of the program has been an increase in the confidence of stage one teachers in working with high needs students generally, and students who have experienced trauma specifically. That confidence has come from three critical activities supported by the RSCST:

- training to help stage one teachers better understand the impact of trauma on students and how it can affect their behaviour
- working one-on-one with stage one teachers to develop new skills for working with students with trauma and having the RSCST as a source of advice and support, and
- training for staff to develop self-care skills to manage their own wellbeing.

Families and community

As a result of the work done in the school, families of identified students have been openly talking about improvements in their children, not just in terms of school behaviour and performance, but at home and in the community. In particular, families have been reporting that children who were previously introverted and uncommunicative, have become more open and engaged with their families and communities.

As a consequence, play therapy has helped the school continue to build relationships and trust with identified families.

Enabling success

Critical to the success of play therapy at the school was the openness and flexible thinking of all involved. That openness started with the department in allowing the opportunity to trial the play therapy as part of the RSCST. The principal and his leadership team welcomed the opportunity to add play therapy to the range of activities they already had in place to support refugee students and their families, and also provided a safe, secure space in which the therapy could be conducted.

In addition to leadership, the openness of teachers and other staff to learn about a new approach, and to try and implement aspects into classrooms was critical. Teachers who are passionate and responsive in supporting students make a critical difference to impacts and outcomes, as do administrative teams who are willing to support families in understanding the program and its goals. Providing staff with training and ongoing support around working with refugee students generally, and play therapy in particular, was critical to the successful implementation of play therapy.

Finally, the RSCST partnered with a single interpreter throughout the program. While it took some coordination between the RSCST and the interpreter to build their partnership, continuity meant that the interpreter became known and trusted by the families of students in the program. The interpreter was also able to assist the RSCST in understanding cultural sensitivities when working with students, families, external organisations, and communities. The success of the program at the school occurred, in part, due to the development of trust amongst all involved.

Conclusion

As part of the broader work of the RSCST, play therapy is one tool available to schools wanting to implement a child-centred strategy focused on the wellbeing of refugee students, their peers and teachers. Play therapy allows children to express themselves and their level of functioning through play, rather than through verbal or other types of communication. With appropriate training, teachers can use elements of play therapy in their classrooms, extending the impact to the broader student community. The challenge is that the pressure to deliver the curriculum, sometimes makes it difficult to allocate the time for play. The RSCST provided extra and novel resources for the use of play therapy in a school already very experienced in creating positive outcomes for refugee students.

Case Study C: Supporting a new regional refugee settlement area

Introduction

This case study details the proactive and ongoing support that the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) has provided to school-based staff in Armidale, a new regional refugee settlement area.

CESE would like to thank the Refugee Support Leader (RSL), Senior Psychologist Education (SPE), school counsellor, refugee coordinator and RSCST member who contributed to this case study.

Background

Armidale is a regional city in the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales and has a population of approximately 24,000 individuals. In August 2017, the Federal Government declared Armidale as a refugee settlement area and announced that approximately 200 refugees from Syria and/or Iraq will be settled over the coming years. The first families arrived in February 2018 and the RSL advised that as of 2019, 102 school aged children had been enrolled across five government primary schools and one secondary school (initially two separate secondary schools that merged in 2019).

As one of its four major focus areas, the RSCST have invested considerable time in developing strong partnerships with internal and external refugee service providers, in particular, RSLs and NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). The key benefit of this collaboration is the implementation of a coordinated and complimentary set of services.

Support through professional development

Upon learning that Armidale would be settling 200 refugees, the RSCST and the Coffs Harbour RSL¹⁴ advocated for all school based staff to receive a suite of professional learning workshops, some of which were co-delivered with STARTTS.

In the first instance, the RSCST and the RSL's (initially the Coffs Harbour RSL until the Armidale RSL was appointed) co-facilitated S.T.A.R.S sessions for principals, School Counselling Service (SCS) staff, teachers and administrative staff. These sessions were designed to raise staff awareness regarding the experiences of refugee students and assist school staff to provide supportive environments that focus on Safety, Trust, Attachment, Responsibility and Skills to facilitate healing and learning. Since the initial sessions, the RSCST has built the capacity of several local school counsellors by training them to co-facilitate S.T.A.R.S sessions with the local RSL for newly appointed staff. This has the additional benefit of Armidale staff being less reliant on the Sydney based team for support.

SCS staff have also received more intensive training co-delivered by the RSCST and STARTTS. These sessions included building awareness and understanding of the culture of the main refugee group entering the area, overcoming challenges that may impact acculturation, psychological assessments appropriate for refugee students, and culturally sensitive and trauma informed therapeutic ways of supporting students and families. Further, the RSCST has continued to deliver psychoeducation for school counselling staff and teachers about play and how it can be used in a counselling and classroom context to promote relationship, safety and development. During these sessions, staff learn how to provide safe and unthreatening environments that are filled with a range of play stimuli for refugee students to explore. Students are supported to progress through play stages that may have been interrupted by traumatic experiences, and as a result, develop skills pertaining to comprehension and expression, positive attachment relationships and social skills.

Twelve months after the first arrival of refugee students to Armidale, the RSCST is delivering self-care sessions to SCS staff and teachers. These sessions assist staff to recognise the signs of burnout and vicarious trauma and how to implement strategies that enable staff to protect their own wellbeing.

Support through advice and consultation

In addition to providing school-based staff with proactive and ongoing professional learning, the RSCST are supporting Armidale staff through advice and consultation via the 1300 number. Common requests for support have included culturally appropriate counselling techniques, partnering with local services and appropriate use of translators.

¹⁴ At this time, Armidale did not have an RSL.

Support through targeted interventions

At the time of the interviews, the RSCST were not known to be providing targeted interventions to Armidale refugee students and their families. Counselling staff commented that students were referred to STARTTS because they have an Armidale office.

Outcomes

The interviewees unanimously report that the professional development delivered prior to the arrival of refugee families greatly supported school-based staff in transitioning refugee students. Prior to February 2018, many of the school-based staff in Armidale had not worked with refugee students and therefore were unaware of the impact that their trauma would have on their capability to learn. School counselling staff, EALD teachers and classroom teachers all report adapting their practice to include the skills and strategies that they learnt during the professional learning and commented that students have responded positively. Staff also report that their practice has changed beyond that of working with refugee students as many of the skills and strategies are appropriate for students that have experienced other types of trauma or may be experiencing other types of language barriers.

Conclusion

Overall, the staff in Armidale report that the support they have received and continue to receive from the RSCST is beneficial. Consequently, the staff are confident that they have the necessary knowledge, skills and access to support to assist refugee students to transition successfully and work towards achieving their full potential.

Case Study D: Working collaboratively with STARTTS to improve outcomes for refugee students

Introduction

This case study describes how the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) has built relationships and worked collaboratively with NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) to better support schools and improve outcomes for students.

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) would like to thank Rachelle Coe, Claire Phillips and Rafik Tanious from STARTTS for their valuable input to this case study, along with the members of the RSCST team.

The STARTTS School program

STARTTS has a collaborative partnership with the Department of Education. STARTTS is a specialist non-profit organisation that provides individual and group psychological treatment and support to torture and trauma survivors, delivers community interventions, training to services, as well as advocacy and policy work.

‘STARTTS in Schools’ is a wrap-around multi-disciplinary part of STARTTS services that includes the Youth Team, Child and Adolescent Counsellors, and the School Liaison Program, along with Families In Cultural Transition Programs (FICT) and Early Childhood services. These programs are driven by responsive, evidence based approaches that have evolved to address the needs of trauma affected refugee background learners and their communities accessing services across educational institutions.

The STARTTS School Liaison Program builds the capacity of schools to support their refugee background learners and families, and assists in the coordination of STARTTS services within schools. STARTTS staff interviewed for this evaluation explain that the nature of work varies according to context and need. Typical activities includes direct counselling, running therapeutic groups, local groups with refugee background learners, professional learning with schools, collaborating with schools to solve some of the challenges they might be experiencing, or supporting schools with practical processes around acculturation and integration for learners from refugee backgrounds.

Collaboration between the RSCST and STARTTS School Liaison Program

There is some overlap in the services that the RSCST and the STARTTS School Liaison Program offers. Soon after the RSCST was established, the management of both programs recognised and raised the potential for duplication as part of a broader stakeholder mapping and planning exercise. Arising from this work regular meetings were set up between STARTTS, Refugee Health and the Refugee Support Leaders (RSLs), to promote collaboration and streamline the services offered to schools.

Since then strong relationships between RSCST and STARTTS staff members have been built at the local level, and the work that each team undertakes has become more clearly differentiated. Staff members from both teams describe the relationship as collaborative, supportive, professional, and effective in improving the support provided to schools. Several staff spoke of the consistent perspectives the teams have regarding trauma, and the consistent approach they take to support refugee students in a school context.

Some examples of collaborative work include:

- partnering to deliver therapeutic workshops to teenage male students
- delivery of play therapy professional learning to STARTTS regional staff
- joint delivery of a play based group
- joint coordination and facilitation of regular network support meetings that aim to provide a network of schools with professional learning and support for working with refugee students
- consultation and collaboration regarding issues that emerge at common schools
- referrals to each other’s individual and therapeutic services, to match the service best suited to the specific circumstances of the case
- co-facilitation of STARS training
- the RSCST team leader and state office based project manager provide strategic support for STARTTS as members of the STARTTS steering committee.

Outcomes arising from the collaboration

The teams have undertaken several projects together and staff from both teams explain that the support they provide to schools and to students together is stronger than the support they provide when operating separately.

For RSCST staff, working together with STARTTS staff means they can draw on broader skillsets, knowledge and experiences. It also means they can reflect together on the issues they are each encountering within schools and the trends they have observed, and then consider in a more comprehensive way the types of supports that schools require.

Working collaboratively has also enabled STARTTS staff to better understand how schools work and to build new connections within the department. This in turn has led to new collaborations and more strategic work, including the opportunity to implement whole school approaches. The ability to broaden reach is particularly important in areas where staffing resources are low.

Finally staff from both teams explain that the opportunity to debrief on issues they are encountering provides valuable emotional and wellbeing support which helps make their complex and challenging work feel more achievable.

Conclusion

RSCST and STARTTS staff members have invested time and effort to develop a strong collaborative working relationship. This has led to a streamlined approach to service delivery and has enhanced the support that both teams provide to schools and to refugee students. Within both teams there is strong interest in continuing and extending the collaboration, to the extent that this is feasible logistically.

8. Conclusion

Summary of key findings

How has the RSCST implemented its four major focus areas?

The Refugee Student Counselling Support Team (RSCST) now has a well-established service model that has been refined over time. The team carries out activity in each of its four overlapping focus areas and activity in each area has increased steadily since the team's inception.

Capacity building has been the key priority for the team from the outset. This occurs through an array of professional learning workshops that the team has developed for different audiences. Team members have also built capacity effectively by working side-by-side with school counselling staff who have then applied these skills in their daily practice.

The team has spent an increasing proportion of its time providing **targeted counselling support** for refugee students with complex needs. Schools particularly reach out to the team for support with challenging and complex behaviours. The RSCST supports complex cases by working alongside school counselling staff, but in certain circumstances team members provide direct individual counselling support. The team also conducts group support work that is highly valued by schools. The overall feedback from schools has been very positive.

The RSCST provides **advice and consultation** concurrently with other support work, and also via a 1300 number that it established. The team has developed **strong local partnerships**, particularly with Refugee Support Leaders (RSLs) and the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS), to provide coordinated and complementary services for refugee students.

What are the challenges faced by the RSCST?

During its establishment phase the RSCST faced challenges in recruitment and staffing changes. The team also experienced difficulties during the establishment of suitable office facilities and while setting up systems.

An ongoing challenge is the difficult nature of the RSCST's work which requires a combination of specialist skills and personal attributes that are not easily found. Setting up new team members to work effectively with schools is a long and involved process, particularly for those new to the department and new to working in schools. Hence any staffing changes require considerable additional work to orient and support new team members. The team leader retired at the end of Term 3 2018 and at the time of writing the role has not yet been permanently filled.

Expectation management is another key challenge. The RSCST is a small Sydney based team that provides specialist statewide support that is not available elsewhere. The team leader and team members have had to weigh up competing factors to determine how best to allocate the team's limited time. This includes considering the need for breadth of service to schools across the state, and depth of support for those most in need of specialist and time-intensive support. In some areas there is an unmet demand for the School Counselling Service (SCS) which heightens the demand for the RSCST and limits opportunities for building capacity to reduce that demand.

Finally, schools are at different stages of readiness for change and the team has had to adapt its approach to suit each school.

What aspects of the RSCST are working well, and what aspects are not working well?

Aspects of the RSCST that are working well are that: 1) they are valued for their expertise in an area of high need; 2) the team's reach has been broad in spite of staffing gaps; 3) the team's reach and influence has been extended by its focus on capacity-building and strong collaborative relationships; 4) the team leader has placed a high priority on team health, sustainability and quality service through mentoring and professional development, and 5) over time the RSCST has established self-evaluative practices for its different work streams.

We identified two aspects not working well. Firstly, schools' awareness of the team's specific responsibilities and range of services could be improved. Work is already underway in this area as the team has new information materials to provide clear and consistent messages about the team's services, and raising awareness is one of the team's 2019 priorities. Secondly, a minority of schools reported that they needed more time from the RSCST to address their support needs. This highlights that persistent gaps in the team's staffing have reduced the potential reach of the service, and that there will be an ongoing need to manage expectations.

What are the perceived improvements to the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?

We heard widespread examples from school staff of observed improvements in refugee students' social and emotional skills, such as better regulation of emotions and behaviours, more positive interactions with peers, and increased confidence in help-seeking. These improvements were described in tandem with a reduced incidence and intensity of negative behaviours and an increased readiness to learn. Sometimes changes were small, and interviewees recognised that bigger changes would be a longer term process. The team has also started collecting pre and post data for individual and group interventions. A case study of a group intervention that the team has documented identifies reduced stress as a key outcome as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Regarding students' families, we heard several examples of perceived improvements to wellbeing, stemming from increased trust and confidence in school staff and a strengthened relationship with the school.

The RSCST's work is highly tailored, and the specific nature of wellbeing outcomes is particular to each context. Our case studies provide detailed specific examples of improvements to wellbeing as they relate to a particular setting and context.

Have there been any unexpected outcomes?

The most prominent positive outcome that interviewees felt was unexpected was improvement to staff wellbeing. Many school staff described feeling more confident and supported to put into practice the skills and strategies they had learnt. This was particularly true when staff needed support with students exhibiting negative and unsafe behaviours. Staff described positive benefits of feeling well equipped to manage incidents that were previously quite stressful for them, and also having reduced exposure to these incidents. We heard that improvements to staff wellbeing were reinforcing and enhancing wellbeing outcomes for students.

Another unexpected outcome is the beneficial impact of new strategies and skills in supporting non-refugee students who had experienced trauma. This has extended the reach of the team's positive impact.

Future considerations

The RSCST has achieved positive wellbeing outcomes for refugee students in many schools in a relatively short period of time. The team should be commended for the quality and scale of support it has provided in challenging circumstances. The team has delivered widespread capacity building initiatives with members of the SCS, teachers and school staff. Their expertise in trauma-informed practice is particularly highly regarded and sought out. They have developed strong collaborative relationships with RSLs and with STARTTS that have improved the set of services available to schools and to refugee students. Demand for the RSCST's services is increasing, and efforts to change practices in some schools will be a gradual process, so the need for support will continue for some time.

Recruitment activity to permanently fill the team leader role (following the previous team leader's retirement) will take place for the third time at the end of 2019. This is a very difficult role to fill, requiring highly specialised skills and experience.

The information gathered in this evaluation indicates that the key area for the team to attend to is communication of the nature of the RSCST's work, and how it can work with schools. The team has already identified awareness building and communication as a priority for 2019, and team members are using new information materials when they meet with schools that aim to clarify and make consistent the messages provided about the team's services and ways of working. Updating and enhancing the information provided on the intranet (currently fairly sparse) is another planned activity that will help address this priority.

An ongoing challenge for the team, together with State Office, will be deciding how to prioritise the team's time. A number of those we interviewed were keen to know how much time an individual school could request from the RSCST. We heard some examples of schools with very large populations of refugee students, with support needs that exceeded the time that the RSCST was able to provide to a single school. Some schools had experienced a disruption to their counselling service which had elevated their refugee student support needs. A number of interviewees felt that a greater presence in regional areas was needed. Weighing up all of these factors against the available number of staff is a difficult balancing act, as is managing expectations of the level of support that can be provided. Another factor that will influence workload and prioritisation decisions is the conclusion of funding for the RSL positions in 2019. At the time of finalising this report the RSCST team was developing new strategies to adapt to this change.

Appendix A: Summary of interview guides

Questions for principals

1. What types of support are needed most by refugee students and their families?
2. What types of support are provided by the RSST?
3. Are you satisfied with the amount of support that the RSST is able to provide?
4. Are you satisfied with the type of support that the RSST has provided?
5. What are some of the challenges faced by the RSST in their work with refugee students?
6. What aspects of the RSST are working well?
7. What aspects of the RSST could be improved?
8. What has been the impact of the RSST on the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
9. Do you measure whether the wellbeing of refugee students and their families changes over time?
 - a. If so, how?
10. What has been the impact of the RSST on the broader school community?
11. Has the work of the RSST lead to any unexpected outcomes?

Questions for school counselling staff

1. What types of support are needed by refugee students and their families?
2. Have you worked with the RSST?
 - a. If so, what has that work involved?
3. Have you received professional learning from the RSST?
 - a. If so, what type of professional learning have you received?
 - b. Were you satisfied with the professional learning that you received?
 - c. What did you like the most about the professional learning that you received?
 - d. What has been the impact of this professional learning on your capabilities?
 - e. What has been the impact of this professional learning on the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
 - f. Are there any other types of professional learning that you would like to receive?
4. Have you had any prior experience working with refugees?
5. What are some of the challenges that you face in your work with refugee students?
6. What has been the impact of the RSST on the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
7. Do you measure whether the wellbeing of refugee students and their families has changed?
 - a. If so, how?
8. What has been the impact of the RSST on the broader school community?
9. Are you aware of the Refugee Support Leaders and their role?
 - a. If so, to what extent do you work with them and what does that work involve?

Questions for RSCST staff about the type of support provided

1. What types of support are needed by refugee students?
2. How are decisions made about the type of support that is provided by the RSST?
3. To what extent do you:
 - a. provide capacity building/professional learning
 - b. provide face-to-face counselling for refugee students
 - c. support families as well as students
 - d. work with school counselling staff
 - e. Work with Refugee Support Leaders
4. Explore for each
 - a. What does that work involve?
 - b. Who do you work with?
 - c. Are you satisfied with this work?
 - d. What challenges have you experienced?
 - e. What else would you like to provide
5. Are you satisfied with the amount of support you are able to provide?
6. Are you able to meet demand for your services? Is there a long waiting list?
7. Are you satisfied with the type of support you are able to provide?
8. What are some of the challenges that you face in your work with refugee students?
9. In cases where you have provided support, what changes have you noticed in the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
 - a. Do you measure this? If so how?
10. What has been the impact of the RSCST on the broader school community?
11. What has been the impact of the capacity building/professional learning on staff?
12. What has been the impact of the capacity building/professional learning on the wellbeing of refugee students and their families?
13. Has your work lead to any unexpected outcomes?
14. What aspects of the RSST are working well?
15. What aspects of the RSST could be improved?

Appendix B: Additional statistics from the RSCST database

Table B1:

RSCST database statistics on nature of activity over time

Nature of activity	2016	2017	2018	2016	2017	2018
	count	count	count	%	%	%
Behaviour	7	90	120	5	29	29
Staff development	42	93	87	31	30	21
Emotional	0	2	60	0	1	14
Meeting/networking	–	18	42	0	6	10
Learning	1	1	20	1	0	5
Other	32	13	19	24	4	5
Assessment	11	6	18	8	2	4
Family welfare	2	17	14	1	5	3
Disability	13	4	11	10	1	3
Attendance	6	9	10	4	3	2
Systemic	7	30	8	5	10	2
Transition	4	10	5	3	3	1
Visa	8	2	3	6	1	1
NA	1	17		1	5	0
(blank)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grand total	134	312	417	100	100	100

Appendix C: Examples of RSCST interventions

Mosaic Program



THE MOSAIC PROGRAM

Mosaic has been designed by the Refugee Student Counselling Support Team from the NSW Department of Education and is in the pilot phase of development.

MOSAIC has been designed to be implemented by school counsellors or school psychologists within a school setting for children aged 10-12 years from a refugee background.

The program runs for **8 weekly 1 hour sessions** plus information sessions for parents and teachers of the students involved. Ideally the number of students in a group is 6-9.

MOSAIC has been facilitated by members of the RSCST with the local school counsellor or school psychologist in attendance as an observer, with a view to building their capacity to facilitate future groups with other students independently or with support if required.

The best environment to run the group is a space in the school where the participants will feel comfortable and safe. There should be enough room for the participants to sit comfortably together, to lie down and enough space for creative arts as well as for interactive activities and games.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING OF MOSAIC

Mental health intervention for students of refugee background has been based on two methods of therapy used individually or in combination, these being: verbal processing of past experiences and therapies through creative arts.

The mosaic program was developed as an intervention consisting of both verbal processing of past experiences and creative arts to address mental health issues related to trauma (Tyler & Fazel, 2014).

Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) has been used extensively with refugee populations and with people who have experienced trauma where students are encouraged to construct a narrative of their life up to and including the present. When performing NET with children, visual aids such as a rope, string, rocks, flowers and drawings have been employed to enable the child to reconstruct life events.

In the MOSAIC program, visual aids were used in several sessions to identify various experiences across the student's lifetime (Gwozdziwycz & Mehl-Madrona, 2013).

Automatic arousal and anxiety provoking responses have been identified as common responses from children who had experienced trauma, specifically responses which were inadequately managed. The inability to interpret and cope with trauma related behaviours has led to the increased diagnoses of physical and mental health disorders in children from refugee backgrounds. Psychoeducation on the physiological responses in relation to traumatic events as well as coping strategies used to maintain emotional and physiological arousal were a significant component of the MOSAIC program to provide participants with positive mechanisms to regulate emotions (Van der Kolk, 2017).

MOSAIC PROGRAM

RATIONALE

The school is a setting that all children attend and the integration of mental health services with other school programs can avoid the cultural barriers that may interfere with access to services. Developing a program designed for school counsellors and school psychologists to implement assists in overcoming these barriers of children accessing mental health and other support services and have a positive impact on refugee children's well-being.

The MOSAIC group program was developed in response to a growing demand for school counsellors and School Psychologists within the Department of Education NSW to manage the complex needs of students of refugee backgrounds. This program provides a therapeutic intervention specific to the needs of refugee students. Furthermore, it was observed that there were no specific school based group interventions in NSW focusing on refugee trauma. MOSAIC was developed to target students who were not prioritised for individual therapy due to the high demand for treatment in the refugee population.

MOSAIC was designed to promote a safe and supportive environment and to provide early intervention to students of refugee background who were identified by learning and support teams as being at risk for behavioural and mental health issues. The efficacy of group programs has been shown to be effective and due to the high volume of potential referrals, group intervention was deemed as an efficient means of service delivery.

MOSAIC was also developed with a focus on building the capacity of school counsellors and school psychologists to assist them in working with students from refugee background. As MOSAIC addresses underlying trauma it is important that the facilitator has training in psychological interventions to manage potential issues which may arise.

OUTLINE OF SESSIONS

Each session includes relaxation and mindfulness activities to build skills for emotional regulation.

WEEKLY SESSIONS

- ◆ **BEING ME:** To explore and strengthen the participants' unique identity.
- ◆ **SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT:** To have a greater understanding and appreciation of their own culture and awareness of the things they have in common.
- ◆ **SYMBOLIC SELF:** To introduce symbols to evoke and express memories
- ◆ **MY SAFE PLACE:** To increase student's ability to feel safe and self-regulate when experiencing anxiety or stress.
- ◆ **MY STORY - MY LIFE JOURNEY:** To improve trauma resolution for the participants through creating a narrative that includes the significant events in their lives.
- ◆ **MY STORY - MY FUTURE - POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH:** To build a new narrative that will assist students in the direction of post-traumatic growth.
- ◆ **STAYING STRONG - BUILDING RESILIENCE:** To review the skills and concepts gained through the program.
- ◆ **CELEBRATION:** To celebrate and share what was learned during the program with parents and teachers.

PILOT PHASE 2

In Phase 2, MOSAIC was implemented with a group of 6 students aged 11-12. The group size was reduced to provide a higher facilitator to participant ratio which would allow further input from participants. Phase 2 is still in the evaluation stage and this data is not yet available.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED AT THIS PHASE

- ◆ This group was due to start during Term 4. This proved problematic due to the many other demands of the school and students during this term. It was decided to postpone this group until the following year to allow for the group to run without interruption. On reflection, it is recommended that MOSAIC would ideally be implemented during Term 2 or Term 3.
- ◆ Changes to school personnel caused some challenges to the smooth implementation of the group.

PILOT PHASE 1

MOSAIC was implemented with 2 different age groups in a regional Primary school. Each group consisted of 12 students. Group 1 participants were 8-10 years old and Group 2 10-12 years old.

Evaluation of the program during this phase was obtained through qualitative written responses, informal interviews with teachers and parents, and reflection by the researchers at the end of each session.

In particular, the students' feedback indicated that they were using the coping strategies taught to them in the MOSAIC program at home, school and in community settings.

One of the goals of this program is to build the capacity of the school counsellor. The school counsellor used many of the concepts and activities of the program to develop and implement a similar group intervention for students with anxiety.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED DURING THIS PHASE

- ◆ The group size was too large to enable ample opportunity for each of the participants to engage meaningfully in all activities. It is recommended that the group size is 6-9 students.
- ◆ The younger cohort struggled with the symbolic nature of some of the activities due to their developmental stage. Even though they enjoyed the activities, they did not appear to respond to the therapeutic nature of the group. The age group for this program is recommended at 10-12 years.
- ◆ Quantitative data was not collected which reduces the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention. Future groups will include quantitative.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- ◆ The evaluation of Phase 2 will be completed by May 2019.
- ◆ Phase 3 of the pilot to be implemented mid-2019 and evaluated by the end of 2019.
- ◆ Following positive evaluation and any required adaptation of the program it's hoped that MOSAIC will become manualised, with a view for NSW school counselling staff to be trained in the implementation of the MOSAIC program.

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Play intervention



Creating a safe place to play for a group of newly-arrived primary school students of refugee background

time to play

**NSW Department of Education and
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time to play recipe

Play is how children explore their world, express delight, and work through their sorrows and fears. Play skills develop in stages, beginning with solitary play, moving through to pretend (*co-operative*) play and are well developed by age 5. Literacy is linked to narrative ability, which also develops as a result of pretend play. Children who can pretend play use more words, longer sentences and can take another's perspective (Stagnitti, 2014).

However, traumatic experiences and reduced opportunities can interrupt this development, impacting children of refugee background academically, socially and emotionally, resulting in referrals for behavioural issues.



preparation

A School Counsellor (and registered Play Therapist) observed that many children of refugee background played at earlier developmental stages than expected, preferring solitary, exploratory (messy) play. So a therapeutic, non-directive approach was used to enable a group of newly arrived refugees to play at their current stage of development to:

- ★ assess their play skills
- ★ build teacher capacity to support social and emotional development through play to restore:
 - safety and control
 - attachment and connections
 - meaning, dignity and value
 - reduce fear and shame (VFST, 2016)

recipe variations

- ★ Play assessment and evaluation
 - Teacher identification of children with limited play skills
 - Video recording of play sessions
 - Use of other assessment tools
 - Use of SDQ
- ★ Variations for teachers
 - Train staff and use of in-class support
 - Implementation of ideas from Time to Play outside therapeutic space
- ★ Research into the use of play within the school environment

conclusion

Providing opportunities for refugees to engage in non-directed play enabled them to engage at their level of development, which was generally equivalent to that of children under 3 yrs, and progress at their own pace towards developing pretend play skills. This had a positive impact on their social and emotional well-being.

ingredients

Children
10 x 7 year olds (50% female)

Time in Australia

M=18.7 months,
Range=7 - 27 months

Country of birth

90% = Iraq, 10% = Syria

Visa Status

70%=202, 30% =200

utensils

Fully equipped play room

Water, shave foam, food colouring

Art, craft, clay

Gross motor objects

Musical instruments

Pretend play objects

1 Registered Play Therapist

+1 Occ. Therapist (STARTTS)

+1 EAL/D Classroom Teacher

method

Step One

- ★ The primary school identified recently arrived refugees in year 2 with mild/moderate support needs and obtained written parental consent
- ★ School Counsellor trained staff in non-directive play, Reflective Responding and Therapeutic Limit Setting skills adapted from Child-Parent Relationship Therapy (CPRT; Landreth & Bratton, 2006)
- ★ Assessed 5 children using the (Teacher) Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997)
- ★ Designed map of room (to collect data on how the children played)

Step Two

- ★ Ran group 10 times in the same format
- ★ Facilitators engaged in supervision monthly
- ★ Collected post SDQ data and conducted teacher interview

outcomes

- ★ 1 child demonstrated developing pretend play skills from session 1
- ★ 9 children engaged in solitary or parallel messy play exclusively for at least the first 5 sessions
- ★ The group distinctly shifted towards associative play in week 6
- ★ By session 10 emerging pretend play skills (*shared narratives*) were observed for most children
- ★ Teacher developed positive relationships with students
- ★ Children played more with each other in the playground
- ★ Children showed increased confidence through expressing their emotions/ideas, talking, interacting, independence, setting boundaries, sharing, problem solving, having fun
- ★ Children showed decreased anxiety through, increased risk taking, trying new things, asking for help and joining in
- ★ Pre and post group SDQ data indicated a decrease in overall stress



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