

# Language, culture and education: exploring Middle Eastern refugee mothers' perspectives on navigating Australian schools

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the experiences and challenges faced by Middle Eastern refugee mothers in engaging with their children's schools in regional Australia.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This qualitative study is underpinned by Berry's (1986) acculturation model and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 refugee mothers from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq in regional Australia to explore their engagement with their children's school and their adaptation to Australian culture.

**Findings** – The findings of this study indicate that limited language proficiency, inadequate access to interpreters and multiple degrees of differences between the heritage and host cultures impact mothers' engagement with their children's schools in regional Australia.

**Practical implications** – The findings emphasise the urgent need for accessible interpreters in regional Australian schools. The provision of tailored support through the inclusion of multilingual staff, cultural liaisons and collaboration between refugee resettlement organisations and schools can help alleviate the potential isolation and marginalisation of refugee mothers both within the school and the broader regional Australian community.

**Originality/value** – This study highlights significant aspects that hinder Middle Eastern refugee mothers' engagement with their children's schools in regional Australia. It amplifies the voices of marginalised women from underrepresented contexts and acknowledges their vital roles as mothers within the host community.

**Keywords** Culture, Education, Language, Parental engagement, Middle Eastern refugee mothers, Regional Australia

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The global refugee crisis has profoundly disrupted the educational trajectories of refugee children and their families. Navigating an unfamiliar educational system in the resettlement context could be a challenging process for refugee parents. Refugee mothers, in particular, often face additional barriers related to gendered parenting roles and caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, cultural differences and new expectations after resettlement (Motevali Zadeh Ardakani *et al.*, 2024). Among the most demanding of these is



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the expectation to engage with their children's school while struggling to adapt to the new environment and acquire a new language.

Parental engagement plays a critical role in supporting refugee children's educational progress, academic achievement and motivation, while also fostering stronger connections between families and schools (Molla, 2024; Wagner and Naidoo, 2023; Barnes and Tour, 2023; Baak, 2019; Wong *et al.*, 2018; Wilkinson *et al.*, 2017; Naidoo, 2015). Differences in cultural norms and communication styles often shape how engagement is understood and enacted by refugee parents and schools. Consequently, refugee parents are sometimes labelled as "disengaged" (Molla, 2024). This perception is primarily due to systemic misunderstandings and the overlooking of underlying factors such as trauma, social isolation, poverty, disrupted educational backgrounds and unfamiliarity with the host country's educational system (Zaidi *et al.*, 2021; Antony-Newman, 2018).

Refugee mothers often arrive in host countries with a range of issues experienced during their forced migration journeys. Many have endured prolonged periods of uncertainty, insecurity and gender-based violence, which can have long-term effects on their mental health and well-being (Borges, 2024; Braun-Lewensohn *et al.*, 2019; Baranik *et al.*, 2018; Savic *et al.*, 2013). The process of resettling in a new country inherently involves additional psychological stress for new arrivals. Although individual experiences vary, research indicates that some groups, such as refugees from the Middle East, may experience higher levels of stress than those from other regions (Jarallah and Baxter, 2019). This may further exacerbate individuals' mental health, leading to the development of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as they begin to rebuild their lives in a new environment (Taştekin Ouyaba and Eslam Parast, 2021).

In addition to trauma and mental health issues, refugee mothers' engagement with schools is often shaped by structural factors such as language barriers (Boit *et al.*, 2020; Lumbus *et al.*, 2021; Pangas *et al.*, 2019) and cultural differences (Baker *et al.*, 2021). Research has highlighted differences between childrearing practices and expectations of children in various cultures (Lewig *et al.*, 2013). For instance, in the Middle Eastern cultures, obedience and respect are highly valued, as children's misbehaviour is often perceived as a source of shame for the family (Yaman *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, in many Middle Eastern families, leaving the parental home at the age of 18 is relatively uncommon, with many young adults remaining with their parents until they are married (Irajzad, 2022). Nevertheless, childrearing practices may be impacted by additional factors, including the socio-economic, educational, and religious background of refugee parents. A comparative study on the resettlement experiences of diverse groups of refugee mothers across Australia, Canada and the USA highlighted that those with higher levels of education tend to hold greater expectations for their children's academic achievements and demonstrate openness towards their children's independence and adaptation to the host country's cultural norms (McBrien, 2011). Nonetheless, such an approach may be deemed culturally inappropriate among other refugee mothers from Middle Eastern culture.

To extend the understanding of refugee mothers' engagement with their children's schools, it is crucial to highlight the immense differences between the Middle Eastern and Western countries. In many cases, the patriarchal systems and traditional gendered norms limit Middle Eastern women's access to the same level of equality, freedom and social participation that are commonly available in Western societies (Jamarani, 2012). In such contexts, women are often denied opportunities to pursue education or participate in work outside the home. As a result, some refugee mothers navigate formal schooling systems in the Western context with little to no prior experience.

While half of the refugee populations resettling in Western countries, including Australia, are women and children, little is known about many of their experiences and challenges post-resettlement. The available literature has mainly focused on urban resettlement contexts, with growing attention to regional settings. Yet, what we know about newly arrived refugee mothers and how they engage with their children's schools is still relatively limited, particularly in regional Australia. In view of the paucity of existing literature, the purpose of this study is to explore a less visible yet critical facet of Middle Eastern refugee mothers' experiences and challenges in relation to their engagement with their children's schools in regional Australia. This study aims to answer the following research question:

*RQ.* How do Middle Eastern refugee mothers describe their experiences and challenges of engaging with their children's schools in the Australian culture?

### Theoretical framework

This study draws on [Bronfenbrenner's \(1979\)](#) ecological systems theory and [Berry's \(1986\)](#) acculturation model. The influence of environmental context is central to refugee individuals' adaptation into their new home ([Williams, 2009](#)). As explained by [Bronfenbrenner \(1979\)](#) in ecological systems theory, human development does not occur in isolation; rather, it is shaped by interactions with people and structures across various levels of environmental systems. These layers include a *microsystem* (interactions with immediate contacts such as family and close neighbours), a *mesosystem* (interconnections between microsystems such as networks between families and schools), an *exosystem* (broader social systems that indirectly impact children such as parental employment), a *macrosystem* (wider society's cultural values, norms and policies that impact parental engagement) and a *chronosystem* (acknowledging the time in the process of adaptation). All these layers play a critical role in shaping the experiences of refugee mothers and their engagement with their children's schools after resettlement.

Disparities between the host and home cultures impact the degree to which individuals adapt to their new environment. [Berry's \(1986\)](#) acculturation theory outlines four different strategies that individuals may adapt to the new environment, including *integration*, *assimilation*, *separation* and *marginalisation*. These strategies reflect people's attitudes towards maintaining their heritage culture as well as the level of engagement with the host society. *Integration* occurs when individuals seek to maintain their heritage culture while simultaneously adapting to the host culture's practices and norms. *Assimilation* involves the rejection of heritage culture in favour of full participation with the dominant culture. *Separation* refers to a preference for preserving one's cultural traditions while avoiding involvement with the host culture. *Marginalisation* arises when individuals are detached from both their heritage and host cultures. Several factors influence the acculturation process, including the size of the group undergoing cultural change, the reasons for migration, the length of contact with the host culture and the degree of difference between the two cultural groups ([Berry, 1997](#)). As such, individuals can experience the acculturation process differently. Adopting a sociocultural lens in this study provides a deeper understanding of the unique experiences and challenges faced by Middle Eastern refugee mothers as they navigate the Australian school system and highlights critical areas where further support may be required.

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative research method to gain a deeper understanding (Patton, 2014) of the experiences and challenges of Middle Eastern refugee mothers in relation to their engagement with their children's schools in the Australian culture.

### Participants

Following ethics approval, participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). The sample included 21 refugee mothers from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq who were enrolled in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in a regional town in New South Wales (NSW). All participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and written consent was obtained prior to the commencement of interviews. Table 1 presents participants' demographic information in greater detail.

### Context

The study was conducted in a regional town on the north coast of NSW, with a resident population of 187,897 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The town serves as a coal mining industry and manufacturing hub and has a steadily growing population of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) residents, including recent humanitarian entrants. According to the most recent census data, around 14.5% of residents were born overseas, and languages other than English are spoken in approximately 10.2% of households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Compared with metropolitan areas, this regional town is characterised by a predominantly White Australian population and relatively limited cultural diversity. However, families from CALD backgrounds have access to interpreting services within schools and through broader community resources. Despite efforts to promote multicultural education and inclusion through the provision of interpreters to facilitate communication between families and schools, access to these services often depends on regional availability, school funding and administrative priorities (NSW Department of Education, 2025).

### Data collection

The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face in participants' native languages (Farsi/Dari and Arabic). Farsi was a shared language for both the researcher and the Afghan participants. An Arabic interpreter was employed to assist with translation of interviews with Arab participants. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2022 during the participants' most convenient time of attendance at the AMEP in an informal atmosphere to facilitate participants' comfort in sharing their experiences. Open-ended questions were used as a guide, and the participants' responses led to individual follow-up questions. The participants were asked a range of questions related to their resettlement in Australia, differences between their heritage culture and Australian culture, and their engagement with children's school.

### Data analysis

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed *verbatim* to precisely capture the conversations of each participant and subsequently translated into English. The bilingual researcher translated the interviews with Afghan participants from Farsi into English. The researcher's fluency in both English and Farsi languages facilitated richer communication with participants, strengthening the validity of the findings (Holmes *et al.*, 2013). The accuracy of Arabic translations into English was checked with the Arabic interpreter

Table 1. Participants' demographic details

| Participants | Pseudonym | Age range | Nationality | Language           | Marital status | Children no | Level of education      |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| 1            | Afsaneh   | 40-45     | Afghan      | Farsi              | Married        | 6           | Not literate            |
| 2            | Najwa     | 35-40     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 5           | Completed high school   |
| 3            | Nasrin    | 35-40     | Afghan      | Dari               | Married        | 5           | Primary school (year 5) |
| 4            | Amal      | 40-45     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 5           | Completed high school   |
| 5            | Noura     | 30-35     | Syrian      | Kurdish and Arabic | Married        | 2           | High school (year 8)    |
| 6            | Robabeh   | 40-45     | Afghan      | Farsi              | Married        | 6           | Not literate            |
| 7            | Layla     | 30-35     | Iraqi       | Arabic             | Married        | 3           | Bachelor's degree       |
| 8            | Zahra     | 40-45     | Afghan      | Dari               | Widow          | 5           | Not literate            |
| 9            | Mahnoor   | 35-40     | Afghan      | Dari               | Widow          | 2           | Primary school (year 4) |
| 10           | Tahereh   | 25-30     | Afghan      | Farsi              | Single Mother  | 1           | Completed year 11       |
| 11           | Vajilha   | 45-50     | Afghan      | Dari               | Married        | 11          | Completed high school   |
| 12           | Salma     | 30-35     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 4           | Completed year 9        |
| 13           | Lina      | 35-40     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 4           | Bachelor's degree       |
| 14           | Dalia     | 35-40     | Syrian      | Kurdish and Arabic | Married        | 5           | Primary school (year 4) |
| 15           | Yasmin    | 40-45     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 3           | High school (year 7)    |
| 16           | Reema     | 45-50     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Divorced       | 6           | Completed high school   |
| 17           | Hiba      | 60-65     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Widow          | 2           | Completed high school   |
| 18           | Salma     | 55-60     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 5           | Primary school (year 4) |
| 19           | Amira     | 35-40     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 4           | High school (year 9)    |
| 20           | Muna      | 40-45     | Syrian      | Arabic             | Married        | 7           | High school (year 6)    |
| 21           | Latifa    | 45-50     | Afghan      | Dari               | Married        | 9           | High school (year 7)    |

following the interviews. The data were repeatedly reviewed to ensure translation accuracy, enhancing a deeper understanding of the data prior to the analysis phase (Lester *et al.*, 2020).

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data by identifying the key themes and patterns between the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The coding process followed an inductive approach to assist with the identification of the initial themes and organisation of the interview data. The initial themes were organised into broader categories, allowing sub-themes to emerge that captured more nuanced aspects of participants' experiences (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018). The NVivo qualitative data analysis software version 12 was used to facilitate this process and to maintain anonymity of the participants (Maher *et al.*, 2018). A rigorous approach was adopted, involving repeated cross-checking of the data for accuracy and revisiting the research question to ensure the interview data addressed the aim of the study. As part of the member checking process, the participants were offered to record the conversation using their personal phone during the interview. This process aimed to support participants who were not literate in their native language to review the conversation, verify the accuracy of the information shared, and encourage further reflection (Motevali Zadeh Ardakani *et al.*, 2024).

#### *Researcher positionality*

In this study, my position as researcher included both an insider and an outsider. As someone born and raised in Iran, I shared a common language (Farsi) with Afghan participants, many of whom had lived in Iran before resettling in Australia. This shared linguistic connection created an insider rapport with the Afghan participants. Being an insider also allowed me to approach sociocultural and sensitive issues with a deeper understanding throughout the research process (Manohar *et al.*, 2017). However, as someone neither of Arabic ethnicity nor with refugee experience, I was positioned as an outsider. Yet, my cultural understanding, familiarity with the Arabic language and experience of working with refugee families facilitated establishing trust throughout the interview process. Through an awareness of my positionality as a researcher, I recognised the inherent power imbalance that often exists within the research process, particularly in fragile contexts involving participants with displacement experience (Fox *et al.*, 2020). This awareness helped me create a safe environment in which participants felt comfortable expressing themselves. To maintain neutrality, I expressed no opinion on the issues discussed during the interviews (Ellis *et al.*, 2007).

#### **Findings**

The analysis of the findings revealed two major themes and a sub-theme that reflect participants' experiences in their engagement with children's schools in regional Australia. The two major themes were "communication through others" and "negotiating motherhood in the new culture: agency and adaptation". The sub-theme was "previous challenges with children's schools". Each will be discussed in turn. To ensure participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings.

#### *Communication through others*

The issue of dependency on children and interpreters for communicating with schools was one of the recurring themes in the participants' narratives. In this study, more than half of the participants (14 / 21) had low educational backgrounds or were not literate in their native language. The majority of participants (19 / 21) reported that they could not perform any tasks without the assistance of interpreters and their children or spouses (if they were

proficient in English). The following participant expressed her concerns about dependency on children for translation, stating:

The main difficulty is the need for an interpreter. To go to the doctor's appointment, if there isn't a private matter, we are allowed to take children to interpret for us. But at the hospital, I'll need an interpreter. They don't accept children for interpreting, same as bank. They have their own rules. You know, there are moments when I feel like I'm not enough for my children. My husband too. We are uncomfortable with being dependent on others. It's very difficult to always have to wait for someone to help us. (*Afsaneh*).

More than half (14 / 21) of the participants highlighted the challenges of accessibility and availability of interpreters in children's schools. For example, a Syrian mother described how a lack of or limited access to an interpreter has impacted her communication with her children's school:

Sometimes the school organises an interpreter, sometimes not. Yesterday, I received a call from my daughters' school. They wanted to speak with me about her. I told them that I have little English. They tried to speak slowly, but I didn't understand their words. I asked them to organise an interpreter for me. They haven't called me back yet. I'm still waiting and worried. I don't know what has happened in the school. Sometimes, I feel embarrassed that I can't talk to them directly. I feel shy when I have an interpreter. I want to be able to ask questions and communicate with people. When I speak English, it takes time for me to make people understand what I am saying, and I feel like they get bored. Sometimes, I feel they [people] ignore me because they have to spend too much time to understand me. (*Najwa*).

Similarly, Afsaneh, who lived in Iran for 22 years, where all her six children were born, shared her challenges in communicating with children's schools in Australia. This participant, who was not literate in her native language, described how she was involved in her children's school prior to resettlement in Australia:

I like visiting my children's schools and speaking with their teachers. In Iran, schools held monthly meetings where I could ask questions regarding my children's learning and behaviour. There were also family counselling sessions, which helped me connect better with my teenagers. I was very interested in these sessions and was a regular attendee. But I can't do it in Australia. I sometimes want to speak with the teachers, but the girls tell me that I need to make an appointment so that they can arrange for an interpreter. (*Afsaneh*).

Furthermore, this participant highlighted the issue of interpreter shortages in regional areas by sharing an experience from her children's school:

My daughter was in year 5 last year, and her school invited all families. There was an interpreter available for Arabs and Africans, but not for us. I had to ask one of my children to come and translate for me [...]. My youngest son was also in kindy last year. It was really difficult for me to go and ask about him. I was very worried. He used to scream and cry at drop-off. There was an Arab man working there. He knew a few Farsi words and was able to tell me that my son was doing ok. It was very difficult. (*Afsaneh*).

The participants' accounts of interpreter shortages reveal that despite the mothers' need for language support, inadequate access to interpreters remains a significant barrier to effective communication between refugee families and schools.

### *Negotiating motherhood in the new culture: agency and adaptation*

The mothers who participated in this study demonstrated various levels of understanding of 'culture', which influenced their engagement with their children's schools. The majority of participants indicated that Australian culture is entirely different from their own. They

expressed disagreement with some features of Australian culture, such as children leaving home at the age of 18, and preferred to maintain their cultural beliefs. The following narratives demonstrate different perceptions of participants in relation to the heritage and host culture:

I like Australia and its people. But I want my children to learn about our culture. In Australia, children usually leave their parents' house when they grow up. This makes me worry. In Afghanistan, it is expected that sons take care of their parents until the end of their lives. (*Nasrin*).

Nothing is similar. It's very different here. For example, in our family, we all live together. We don't split when the children grow up. We don't like our children to go and live by themselves. We stay as a family. (*Amal*).

Conversely, one participant believed that the influence of her childrearing practice was greater than the host culture:

I think difference in culture is not really important. It depends on people. Parents do not need to be concerned about cultural issues if they teach their children what is right and what is wrong. (*Noura*).

When participants were asked how they viewed their role as a mother in Australia compared to their home country, many reported that they felt burdened with multiple domestic obligations and caregiving responsibilities. For instance, Nasrin stated how her motherhood role was impacted by the lack of family support:

It's really difficult to be alone here. Housework is a lot, and I can't find time to study [English]. I have five children [...]. They all need different things that I have to prepare. When I was in Afghanistan, my mother and sister helped me with everything. My older son was almost raised by my sister. But I have to do everything here by myself. It's very different. There were days when I was so sick that I couldn't even stand on my feet, but I had to get up and cook and do everything for my children. (*Nasrin*).

All participants expressed a lack of support from their husbands in managing domestic responsibilities. One participant tearfully shared her experience:

Believe me, I feel like I haven't sat down since I became a mother. I wanted my children to be comfortable and to study, so I did all work alone. I had no help. My husband just sits and asks me to bring him tea. Afghan men never help in the house! (*Robabeh*).

Nevertheless, the participants expressed appreciation for living in Australia, where their children have access to free education. Almost all mothers stated that children are their priority in life. Afsaneh, who was not literate in her native language discussed some of these priorities:

As a mother, I feel the same as I felt before [arrival in Australia]. I want my children to have peace at home. I prepare everything for them so they can study. I do my best to be the same mother I was [back home]. I have wonderful children. They are very understanding. For example, my eldest son wanted to quit TAFE and work full-time to help us financially. I refused because I want him to continue his education. (*Afsaneh*).

Interestingly, some participants stressed the importance of supporting children's sense of agency and independence. For example, Robabeh stated:

Although I'm the mother in the house and do everything for my children, I don't make decisions for them. For example, my daughter got engaged recently, my husband and I didn't say a word. She made this decision herself. When I was in Afghanistan, girls didn't have any right to make decision in marriage. Even now it's the same in Afghanistan. (*Robabeh*).

One of the main differences between the Australian and Middle Eastern cultures for the participants was the *hijab*. Although all mothers who participated in this study were Muslim and had *hijab*, most of them supported their daughters' choice. An Afghan mother explained:

When we first arrived, my younger daughters went to school with scarf. The school principal assured us that there had never been any negative incidents, but if my daughters are ever feeling insulted because of their *hijab*, we should let them know. After a few days, the girls told me that they no longer want to wear a scarf. Back in Iran [first country of asylum where the children were born], they sometimes felt rejected at school by other children because they were Afghan. That's why they didn't want to have the same experience here because they looked different. My eldest daughter who works part-time also doesn't have *hijab* at work. But she wears scarf inside the Afghan community. Only because people in the community may make judgement on us. (*Afsaneh*).

Reflecting on the views of other participants, an Arab mother, however, believed her daughter should have *hijab*. She stated:

I tried to give my daughter a good impression of *hijab*, so that she would like to have it. Thank God, she was persuaded. But when she went to school for the first time wearing a scarf, some students made fun of her. I explained to my daughter why we have *hijab* and how our family is different from theirs. I told her that they follow their religion and that we follow ours. Everyone in my country has *hijab*, and this is seen as normal. (*Layla*).

These contrasting views on *hijab* reveal underlying differences among mothers who share similar religious beliefs but hold different approaches to child-rearing.

#### *Previous challenges with children's schools*

In discussing cultural differences, some participants shared their previous experiences with children's schools in their home country or first country of asylum. Even though each participant's situation and experiences were unique, they all reported experiences including financial hardships and difficulties enrolling their children in school in their first country of asylum. For Afghan participants, this was associated with an additional layer of perceived racism. Robabeh, who had spent more than 20 years in Iran, wept throughout the interview as she described the discrimination her children faced at school:

Iran was very difficult for us. School was expensive [...] [crying]. All my children couldn't go to school because we didn't have money. We could only send two of them [my children] to school. One day, I went to my daughters' school and saw that they had separated Afghan children outside. The principal was a good man. I asked him "why are you keeping Afghan children outside in this cold weather?". He replied "because they haven't paid the school fees. They can't go to the class" [...]. I went to my daughter, removed the earrings she was wearing, sold them and returned to school to pay the fees. Can you believe that?! She still can't forget that moment [...] [crying]. (*Robabeh*).

Similar to Robabeh, Zahra, who had also lived in Iran for the same duration, described how her children's schooling was impacted following her husband's death:

My children were all going to school but after their father died, my older daughter had to drop out. We couldn't afford the school fees. One time the school payment was overdue for my youngest daughter who was a very good student. It was a small amount, but we couldn't afford to pay it. She was questioned about this in front of the other students and was given a low mark because of it. It was very difficult. (*Zahra*).

These responses highlight how previous experiences of racism and discrimination persist even after resettlement and continue to influence refugee mothers' current interactions with schools in Australia.

## Discussion

The analysis of the findings indicates two primary barriers to participants' engagement with their children's schools. The first barrier is related to policy and practice limitations. According to the narratives, there were significant differences between mothers' engagement with their children's schools in their home countries and in Australia. For instance, the participants were able to attend school meetings, converse with teachers and receive information directly. In Australia, however, language barriers and limited access to interpreters have reduced opportunities for refugee mothers to effectively interact and build relationships with school staff, teachers and other parents. The mothers were heavily reliant on interpreters and their children for communication. Although they appreciated their children's support, some narratives revealed underlying feelings of insecurity and shame associated with their lack of or limited proficiency in English.

In addition, the participants encountered situations where they felt uncomfortable discussing personal or sensitive issues, particularly in the presence of their children, as well as additional challenges during urgent communications from schools. These limited opportunities for interaction with children's schools can contribute to participants' social isolation and marginalisation within the school community (Berry, 1986). As a result, they were unable to engage meaningfully in their children's school activities, such as understanding assemblies, interacting with other parents, participating in conversations or reading the school newsletters and their translations, particularly when they were not literate in their native languages (Motevali Zadeh Ardakani *et al.*, 2024). From an ecological perspective, parental involvement is shaped by interactions between family, school and policy environments. However, the mothers in this study were isolated within their microsystem environment, with meaningful interaction across the mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem levels made possible only through interpreters (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This highlights the need for policy and practice changes that more effectively address the unique needs of these mothers.

The second barrier relates to the cultural differences between the home and host contexts. Consistent with the previous literature, the findings of this study highlight the influence of cultural norms, parenting styles and childrearing practices (Lewig *et al.*, 2013) on refugee mothers' engagement with children's school. The participants perceived the Australian culture as "very different" from their own and expressed hesitation in adapting to some aspects of Australian culture, such as children leaving home at the age of 18. However, they appeared more receptive to other aspects, including supporting children's decisions in marriage and hijab. These findings suggest that family structure is influenced by the ecological context and can be reshaped over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, certain cultural values, traditions and norms maintain a strong presence within families and often remain unchanged throughout the acculturation process (Berry, 2005).

Refugee mother's engagement with children's schools can also be influenced by the systemic, gendered and institutional barriers. This is supported by the narratives when participants discussed substantial domestic roles and the lack of husband's support. In patriarchal systems, women are not traditionally expected to pursue education, participate in work outside the home or make decisions in the family (Jamarani, 2012). These limitations considerably impact their roles as mothers navigating school systems in the host country. Reflecting on the chronosystem context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), previous experiences of exclusion from their children's schools in their first country of asylum can contribute to ongoing anxiety, influencing mothers' current engagement with schools in Australia. For the participants of this study, engagement with their children's schools represented a new and often challenging expectation within the resettlement context. Acknowledging this less

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visible aspect of refugee mothers' experiences is crucial for developing responsive, effective and inclusive support systems.

### Implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into refugee mothers' engagement with Australian schools, offering significant implications for policy and practice. The implications highlight the urgent need for policy reforms at the macrosystem level to ensure greater allocation of interpreting services outside of the major cities. The finding also suggests that establishing stronger collaboration at the mesosystem level between refugee resettlement organisations and schools can strengthen interactions between schools and refugee families. This may include funding models that incentivise partnerships between schools and community organisations. Regional schools could provide tailored support for refugee families through the inclusion of multilingual staff and cultural liaisons.

In addition, technological innovations, such as AI-based simultaneous translation tools, could be used to provide real-time oral translation for parents during and beyond school interactions, thereby reducing the reliance on children as interpreters. It is important to adopt a proactive approach to identify refugee mothers with limited engagement with schools, assess their specific needs and ensure that support is delivered equitably across the school community. In doing so, ongoing professional development in cultural competency enables teachers and school staff to better understand and support families from refugee backgrounds. Finally, parent education workshops and peer mentorship programs can promote greater engagement among mothers and address the specific barriers they may face in navigating the Australian school system.

### Conclusion

This study explored the experiences and challenges faced by recently arrived refugee mothers from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq in their engagement with children's schools in the Australian culture. The findings indicate that limited language proficiency, inadequate access to interpreters, dependency on children for translation, and multiple degrees of differences between the heritage and host cultures influenced mothers' engagement with their children's schools. Australian schools working with refugee families should develop an informed understanding of the unique circumstances of these mothers and similar refugee groups to ensure appropriate support. Addressing these challenges requires urgent investment in recruiting teachers from CALD backgrounds and in expanding access to interpreters in regional Australia. While the findings of this study may not be generalised due to its regional focus and small sample size, it makes a significant contribution to multicultural education and refugee resettlement research in Australia and similar contexts. Future research could focus on larger groups of refugee mothers from a variety of countries and diverse regional centres to capture broader insights into their engagement with their children's schools.

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### Further reading

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