

Case studies

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The case studies have been provided to support the professional learning activities (PLAs). They are designed to support teachers and those working with schools to develop a deeper understanding of the refugee experience. When used as part of a PLA, the case studies are intended to assist with reflecting on existing practice and support areas identified for change.

Summary of case studies and recommended use

Case study summary	Recommended use
<p>Case study 1: Steven the Donkey, by Ayen, aged 6 Ayen, aged 6 and now in Australia recalls his memories of living in a refugee camp in Kenya and his pet donkey.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 2
<p>Case study 2: Rhadia, aged 11 Rhadia is in Grade 6 at primary school. The story describes her life and family in Iraq before her family was forced to flee after the disappearance of her father. After time in a refugee camp, Rhadia, her mother and sister arrive in Australia and the story describes the resettlement challenges for the family, including schooling in Australia.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 1 • PLA 2 • PLA 4 • PLA 5
<p>Case study 3: Nan, aged 4 Nan is of Karen background and was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. The story describes life in the refugee camp before coming to Australia. It tells of the unfamiliar nature of being in a new country from a four-year-old's perspective and describes Nan's first day at childcare.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 1 • PLA 2 • PLA 4 and PLA 5
<p>Case study 4: Aadem, aged 12 Aadem is Sudanese, in Grade 6. He arrived in Australia seven years earlier from a camp in Kenya. The story briefly identifies the many transitions before and since arrival in Australia and then describes a difficult school day for Aadem and the many interactions and school responses to supporting him.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 1 • PLA 4 • PLA 5
<p>Case study 5: Abdullah, aged 15 Abdullah spent the first 10 years of his life in an isolated rural area in Afghanistan. His family then fled to Pakistan where he had a small amount of schooling in a new language before working. The story then describes his experience of schooling in Australia in a language centre and the challenges of transition to a mainstream secondary school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 1 • PLA 2 • PLA 4 • PLA 5 and PLA 7
<p>Case study 6: Paw, aged 17 Paw was born in Karen state in Burma. When she was seven her village was attacked and she saw her father killed and spent months hiding and fleeing from soldiers. The story then describes her time in a refugee camp and arriving in Australia when she was 16. The story highlights the challenges she confronts as she engages in education in Australia in the post-compulsory years with a disrupted educational background.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 1 • PLA 2 • PLA 3 • PLA 4 and PLA 5
<p>Case study 7: Michael, aged 18 Michael arrived from Sudan as an unaccompanied minor with his two younger brothers. He attended English language school for six months and then enrolled in Year 10.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General reading
<p>Case study 8: Layla, aged 17 Layla spent 10 years in a refugee camp before arriving in Australia. The story follows her pathway to pursue her dreams of becoming a nurse. Layla's pathway includes VET, VCE, then VCAL, and movements between different education settings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 7 • PLA 3
<p>Case study 9: Mary, aged 33 Mary is a parent of five children attending primary and secondary schools in Australia. She has never attended formal schooling and missed the 510 hours of English tuition available on arrival due to her many family responsibilities. She still has family in Kenya and her husband is due to leave Australia to help rebuild the new Southern Sudan.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 8
<p>Case study 10: Shirin aged 16 Shirin arrived in Australia as an asylum seeker and having spent time on Christmas Island is now in Year 10 at a Melbourne high school. The story describes her journey to Australia, the transitions she has experienced as well as her concerns about the demands of senior high school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLA 2 • PLA 3 • PLA 4 and PLA 5



CASE STUDY 1

Steven the Donkey, by Ayen, aged 6

I was born in a refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya. In the camp there were no pillows but we all had a blanket. My family also had a very special helper. It was a small donkey named Steven.

It was always sad at the camp because there was usually no food to eat. When my family and the other families had no food, we would begin to starve. Starving feels like when you are so hungry your tummy hurts. It makes rumbling sounds inside you that can go for a long time. We had nothing really to feed Steven either. When I was starving, I could not cry because I did not have enough energy to make the crying sound or to squeeze tears from my eyes. When we went to bed hungry, my mum would try to make us feel better. She would say, 'There is food growing right now while we sleep. It will be ready soon.' She was right because we had been given some seeds to grow.

There were carrot seeds and some other vegetables. I did not want to go to sleep while the food was growing. Sometimes I would drink from my mother. She made her own milk for me, but she needed to eat food to make the milk. We did have a lot of water in the camp. I would climb on Steven and he would take me to collect the water for people. I could go on my own because the well was not too far away. It would take about 20 minutes to get there but I knew a short-cut and I could get there in five minutes. I always took the short-cut because I would have to gather water many times in one day. I would give water to people for drinking, for people who are starving and sometimes for cooking.

I tried very hard to always be back in the camp before it got too late. If I got home late my mum would get cross with me because if you are a little girl on your own in the dark someone might kill you. I liked to put the water that Steven and I collected, on to the vegetables to help them to grow. Everyone took great care of the growing vegetables. When we came to Australia I had to leave Steven behind.

Donkeys can't fly on planes. I miss him but now he is helping my cousin's family to collect water for the people in Kakuma. I hope that the people who have Steven remember to take the short-cut.

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CASE STUDY 2

Rhadia, aged 11

Rhadia is 11 years old and is in Grade 6 at primary school in the western suburbs of Melbourne. Her sister is in Grade 3. She was born in Iraq, of a Shiite Muslim family.

When she was growing up, Iraq was ruled by the Ba'athist Socialist party, which would not entertain any political opposition. Until she was seven years old, Rhadia lived in Baghdad with her mother, father and younger sister. She had a large extended family, and her grandmother and two uncles shared her house. Rhadia's father was a journalist and her mother had trained as a science teacher but stayed at home to look after the household after she was married. Rhadia worked hard at school and had many friends. When Rhadia was seven years old, her father left for work one morning and did not return. The family never heard from him again.

Talking about her father became taboo in Rhadia's household, as everyone was so upset by his absence. Rhadia heard her cousin whispering that he had been imprisoned, tortured and murdered, which devastated Rhadia. Rhadia missed and worried about her father desperately.

After Rhadia's father disappeared, the police often came to their house to interrogate Rhadia's uncles and Rhadia witnessed them beating her favourite uncle. Rhadia hated the feeling of fear in the family whenever the police visited. One evening, the police visited the house and arrested Rhadia's two uncles. During the night, Rhadia's mother packed her and her sister into a truck that was going to Iran. Rhadia had no time to say goodbye to her beloved grandmother and friends, and cried to go home as they drove. They paid for the journey by selling the last of the family treasures and belongings, and bribing Iranian officials.

Over the next year, Rhadia, her sister and her mother lived in a refugee centre in Iran, where 5000 people lived in crowded, dirty conditions. Her mother struggled to provide food and safety for the family, often relying on the generosity of others to survive. There were often rapes and fighting in the camp. There was limited schooling for Rhadia and her sister in the refugee centre.

In desperation, her mother wrote to an old colleague of her husband who had fled to Australia a few years before, and he agreed to sponsor them to come to Australia. On the bus from the Tullamarine airport, Rhadia thought the country very odd. Colours and smells were different; traffic was fast and regulated. People were dressed differently from those in Iraq and Iran, and she saw women and girls of her age with bare legs, arms and heads. Sometimes she was stared at. The family moved into their friend's small flat, but after three days, they all realised that there was not enough space and Rhadia's mother was uncomfortable in a flat with a single man.

Rhadia, her sister and mother moved to a flat where they could stay for four weeks. There, Rhadia's mother was told that her children must attend the local primary school, which had a language centre for students to learn English, and within a week of arriving in Australia Rhadia and her sister had started school.

Rhadia was bewildered by school in Australia. In Iraq, the children sat in rows and were quiet and obedient to the teacher, who was respected as the source of knowledge for the students. In Australia, the classroom seemed noisy and chaotic, and there was a different style of teaching and learning. The students were encouraged to ask questions and challenge the teacher's words.

Worse, Rhadia could not speak or write in English, and could not pursue her old enjoyment of writing stories to share with her teacher.

Rhadia missed the rest of her family terribly. Her mother wanted to help Rhadia and her sister with their homework, but she was prevented by her own lack of English and knowledge of Australian schooling. Rhadia often had stomach pains and had to miss school and stay home with her mother, but the doctor could not find anything wrong with her. Rhadia despaired of learning English, making Australian friends, and of ever achieving her father's dreams for her of university and a career.

The family never lost their fear of the police knocking on the door, and the family often stayed at home because Rhadia's mother was fearful of walking in the streets where she may see a policeman. She was also learning English and picked up some casual work at a factory. Because her mother often lay on her bed and cried with loneliness, Rhadia increasingly took on the responsibility of housework and care of her younger sister. Rhadia became very withdrawn, and her teachers worried about her ability to study. Her younger sister was often involved in arguments at school, and was often angry and defiant. Her mother was fearful of the consequences of the school calling her to complain.



CASE STUDY 3

Nan, aged 4

Nan is four years old and was born in a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Burma. Nan is of Karen background and has one younger brother and two older sisters. Her parents have been living in the refugee camp for 17 years. Nan helps her sisters collect water for the family. Nan likes to play with her cousins and is often cared for by her Aunty, who she adores.

It is unsafe outside the camp, and Nan has often heard shooting in the jungle near the camp. Nan's mother worries about getting enough food for her children. Nan's mother is often sad and cries as she misses her parents and a brother who were killed during the conflict.

After 17 years of living in the refugee camp, Nan's family are leaving to come to Australia. They must say goodbye to Nan's Aunty, cousins and friends.

Nan's family are taken to a house in the western suburbs of Melbourne. There are big roads with lots of cars and big houses. Everything smells different and looks different. There is lots of food but Nan doesn't like it. There are so many rooms and beds in the house but Nan is happy that her family all sleep together in the same room.

After a week, Nan's mother and father take her sisters to school. Nan misses her big sisters. Then her mother and father go to English classes and Nan and her baby brother are taken to a childcare centre. Nan can't understand what the other children are saying. A lady is speaking very loudly to her mum and smiling. Nan's mum stays with her and they sit on a chair and watch.

The next time they go to the childcare centre Nan's mother leaves her there. Nan misses her mum and dad and doesn't know where her baby brother is. Nan sits very quietly in the corner waiting. The smiling lady sits next to her and shows her some pictures in a book.

CASE STUDY 4

Aadem, aged 12

It is week three of Term 1 and Aadem is in Grade 6 and aged 12. Aadem came to Australia from Kenya when he was five years old. He lives with his mum and two younger sisters and two older brothers. His sisters attend the same primary school as Aadem. His family is from a village in southern Sudan, but the family had to flee when Aadem was just a few months old. His father was killed and he has no memory of him. The family fled to a refugee camp in Kenya. His two younger sisters have a different father to Aadem. Aadem developed a strong bond with his 'new' father but has not seen him since leaving the refugee camp seven years ago. Since living in Australia, Aadem has lived in six different houses and attended two different primary schools.

Aadem has been in a fight at the beginning of the school day. He was immediately sent to the principal's office along with two other Sudanese boys. Aadem is often sent to the principal's office. The principal calls each student into her office individually and asks them what happened. She then calls all three boys in and says she doesn't know what to do with them. This is the third time this week they have been sent to her for fighting and nothing the school does makes any difference. She tells them everyone tries very hard and they are lucky to come to such a good school. She tells them they can't play soccer at lunchtime for two weeks as punishment. She is sending them to different classes for the morning and if they behave they can go back to their own class after recess. She tells them if there's any more fighting, then next time she'll be sending them home and she is seriously considering whether this is the right school for them.

Aadem is sent to a Grade 2 class for the morning. He is hungry and has missed out on the breakfast program that he usually attends because he was sent to the principal's office. He is cross to be in a class with babies and angry that the principal didn't care that he didn't do anything in the fight except yell and feels he's being unfairly punished. He thinks teachers at this school aren't fair and they send him to the principal's office even when he hasn't done anything. Aadem hates getting into trouble every day. He doesn't think any of the teachers like him and they just think he's a naughty boy who makes trouble all the time. The thing he likes about school is having other kids to play soccer with and all the good sports equipment he gets to use. He would like to be a good reader so he can do well at high school. He is worried about going to high school next year, but thinks it will be good to be with his brothers. He also thinks his new Grade 6 teacher is all right and she smiles at him sometimes so maybe she's nice.

In the Grade 2 class the teacher is telling everyone to draw a picture of the country their family is from. Aadem doesn't want to do this. Drawing is for babies. He doesn't think the teacher really means that he has to do a drawing, and anyway he can't even remember anything about the country he came from. 'Come on Aadem', says the Grade 2 teacher when she's walking around the room. 'You can draw us a nice big picture of Africa. Africa is a beautiful country and we'd love to have your picture in our room too.'

Aadem sits on the chair until recess and runs out the door when the bell goes. The teacher follows him out the door and asks him to come back and sit on the mat until she says everyone can go outside. Aadem sits on the mat at the back. The teacher tells him to move closer to her, to let go of the table leg that he's holding on to and that he needs to cross his legs when he sits on the mat at school. Then she sends everyone outside. At recess Aadem goes to the basketball court and joins in with some other kids.

When he goes back to his Grade 6 class after recess his teacher smiles at him and says; 'Hi Aadem, it's great to see you. I'm glad you're here because now we're going to read the next chapter of our class book, Harry Potter. Could you help me and go and get the book for me please?' Aadem smiles and goes to the class bookshelf to look for the Harry Potter book. Aadem thinks this is a great story and can't wait to find out what happens next!



CASE STUDY 5

Abdullah, aged 15

Abdullah grew up in Ghazni, an isolated rural area in Afghanistan. His father was a farmer with a small holding of land. Neither of his parents had been to school and they were both illiterate. Abdullah's mother died when he was young. Abdullah's grandmother lived with the family and looked after Abdullah and his brother and sister while their father worked.

Abdullah was the only child in the family to attend school. Although his first language was Hazaragi, the language of tuition in school was Dari. The school had two teachers and 100 students. Abdullah loved school but was often required to help his father on their land, and so his attendance was erratic.

When Abdullah was 10 years old his cousin disappeared while working in the family field. Soon after this the family began receiving threats. Abdullah fled with his family, including his grandmother and aunt, and they made their way to Pakistan.

In Pakistan the family lived with relatives in Peshawar. The only schooling available to Abdullah was in a very overcrowded community school with teachers who spoke in Urdu. Learning was predominantly by rote. Discipline could be harsh and if students made mistakes they would often be hit. Abdullah did pick up enough Urdu to be able to get a job selling small goods on the roadside for a local shop keeper. As this was the only income the family had and they relied on it to survive, Abdullah had to leave the school after one year.

When Abdullah was 14 years old he and his immediate family were granted humanitarian visas for Australia. His grandmother and aunt were refused visas. On arrival in Melbourne Abdullah and his family lived with a cousin of Abdullah's mother's until they could find more permanent and affordable housing. Abdullah spent six months at an English language school before going into Year 8 at his local high school. Abdullah really enjoyed the language centre, made many friends and played soccer at lunchtimes. He was looking forward to high school and his dream to become a doctor so he can help his community.

He found the high school very hard. When the transition officer from the language centre visited the school after six months to see how he was going, his year level coordinator said he was really struggling to complete the Year 8 curriculum and had difficulties fitting in. Abdullah told the transition officer he was unhappy and lonely, particularly at lunchtimes. He enjoyed physical education and music, and had enjoyed making a model in maths. Abdullah said, while in EAL he could understand some of the work, he felt the other subjects were just too hard. His work sheets and notes for all subjects were mixed together in one unorganised folder. He said some teachers were nice but he didn't know any of their names and felt embarrassed asking for help.



CASE STUDY 6

Paw, aged 17

Paw is 17 years old. She was born in Karen state in Burma. When Paw was seven, her village was attacked and she saw her father killed. Paw, her mother and younger brother hid in the jungle. They were separated from her grandparents and older sister and do not know what happened to them. They lived and travelled in the jungle for months, hiding from soldiers and eating whatever they could find. Finally, they reached a refugee camp on the border of Thailand and Burma but it took many more months to become registered and eligible for food rations.

In the camp, they built a simple hut to live in. They had to queue for a long time each day to get water. Paw's mother was deeply traumatised by the death of her husband and the disappearance of her daughter and the rest of the family. She also worried that the camp would be attacked and more of her family would be harmed. Paw often found it difficult to sleep and had nightmares about her experiences.

Paw went to school in the camp when she could, but often she had to help her mother with getting rations and firewood, and in the sewing business they started. The school had many students and few teachers, so the classes were very big. The students had to learn their work off by heart and Paw found that very difficult sometimes when she was tired and hungry.

Paw loved to meet and talk with her friends. Sometimes they sat and sewed while they chatted, sometimes they just walked and talked, and sometimes they did their homework together. She often wished she had more time to spend with them.

Paw in Australia

Paw's family moved to Melbourne when she was 16. She found it very hard. They lived in a small flat and initially everything was very strange and frightening. She missed her friends back in the camp. She went to an English language school for 12 months where she learnt English and how Australian schools work. She couldn't get used to things like looking at people when you talk to them, and giving an opinion to the teacher, and she found English and maths very difficult.

Paw wanted to be a doctor because she saw the good work they did in the camp and was keen to go to high school and study more. She started in Year 10 but didn't understand what teachers said because they spoke too fast. She worried that teachers would ask her a question and everyone would laugh at her so she smiled to hide her feelings. There was one teacher who always asked Paw how she was and helped her with her work, and so she liked going to his class.

After a while Paw made a couple of friends and that made it easier, but they spoke Karen and couldn't help her in class. Her mother needed help with appointments and Centrelink, and Paw had to help her and miss school. Then the teachers got angry with her and told her that her Centrelink payment would be stopped. Paw began to think it didn't matter. She would never learn and would never be a doctor. It would be easier not to go to school.



CASE STUDY 7

Michael, aged 18

Michael arrived in Australia at the age of 18 with his two younger brothers as unaccompanied minors (i.e. without their parents) from Sudan. He was enrolled in a language school on arrival in Australia. His English progressed quickly at the language school, as he had previously been sponsored to study English for a year in Uganda. After six months he was enrolled in Year 10 at a local secondary school.

The first year of secondary school was difficult for Michael and his brothers, as they struggled to pay their rent and household bills. As the eldest of the siblings, Michael was responsible for the family. With the support of teachers, he was able to find a part-time job to help support his family and continue his senior secondary school studies.

When Michael commenced his secondary school studies he told his teachers that his dream was to become a high court judge. During the individual pathway planning sessions the refugee pathways worker and Michael looked at the reasons why he wanted to do this. He explained that he was passionate about working in the legal field where he could make a difference and help the Sudanese community. The refugee pathways worker was able to explain that there were many other jobs in the legal field that help people, identifying realistic pathways and opportunities that were available.

Michael decided to study Criminal Justice at TAFE. The refugee pathways worker assisted him with the VTAC application process and fulfilling course requirements, including an interview and information session. After successfully completing his VCE studies Michael was accepted into Criminal Justice at TAFE.

Migrant Information Centre, 2009

CASE STUDY 8

Layla, aged 17

Layla fled Somalia at the age of two with her mother and younger siblings to a refugee camp in Kenya, where she spent the next 10 years. She had less than three years of formal schooling before arriving in Australia at the age of 14.

By her fourth year in Australia, Layla had settled well into her VCE studies, despite moving schools twice after leaving the English language school. As she was interested in working in the health and community services field, she combined her VCE studies with VET studies in community services.

With the help of the refugee pathways worker, Layla developed a pathway to becoming a nurse. The refugee pathways worker helped her to navigate health and community career websites and complete career quizzes whilst also providing her with clear information on health and community services pathways. They attended university and TAFE open days together.

The refugee pathways worker also organised a VET work placement for Layla at the local migrant information centre. This was an excellent opportunity for her to experience a working environment and to define and confirm her career choices. The refugee pathways worker also helped her to obtain a financial scholarship to enable her to continue her VET studies in Year 12.

Given Layla's severely disrupted schooling, she found the first year of VCE extremely challenging. After discussing her study and pathway options with the refugee pathways worker, she decided to study Year 12 Vocational Certificate of Applied Learning and apply by direct entry for a nursing course at TAFE the following year.

Migrant Information Centre, 2009



CASE STUDY 9

Mary, aged 33

Mary is a Sudanese woman who fled Sudan with her husband, one brother and her parents when she was 17 years old. Mary never attended formal schooling and is unable to read or write in her own language. Her husband experienced five years of disrupted, non-sequential formal schooling in Sudan. The couple spent eight and a half years in a refugee camp in Kenya, where three of their five children were born. The family has been in Australia for nearly five years. Mary's parents and brother are still in Kenya. Mary's husband works full-time in a factory and travels three and a half hours per day on public transport for work. Due to Mary's focus on caring for her children, she has been unable to complete the 510 hours of English language lessons to which she is entitled. Her eldest child is in Year 7 and two of her children are in primary school. She has two preschoolers, one of whom has a hearing impairment.

Mary and her husband have family in Sudan to whom they regularly send financial support. Mary and her husband have cousins living in Australia. The cousins live in a nearby town and Mary sees them at least once a month. The children of the cousins do not attend the same schools as Mary's children. Mary's husband is due to leave Australia to spend some time to help rebuild the newly independent southern Sudan.

CASE STUDY 10

Shirin, aged 16

Shirin was born in Tehran, Iran. As a young child she enjoyed playing sports and listening to music with her friends. She was a good student and she particularly enjoyed Maths and English. Shirin has never known why her father was imprisoned when she was 13, but she knew her mother was so worried that they had to leave Iran.

Shirin travelled with her mother through Malaysia and Indonesia over a period of many months before boarding a boat to Christmas Island. Their boat trip lasted 19 days in which time they ran out of food and water. Shirin couldn't swim and was afraid because she had heard about some boats going missing. She befriended another girl on the boat whom she enjoyed talking to and both girls were looking forward to getting to Australia and attending school again.

Eventually, the Australian navy found their boat and took them to Christmas Island. All the adults were interviewed by the immigration department, and Shirin and her mother had several appointments with doctors and case workers. Eventually they joined the community detention program in Melbourne, but Shirin's friend and her family went to a detention centre in Darwin. This caused sadness and confusion for both girls.

Shirin spent 6 months in a language school and was happy there, as she felt her English was improving and she made some new friends. She is now in Year 10 at a local secondary school where she feels everything is too hard, even making friends is difficult. Her mother doesn't speak English very well and as she seems sad all the time Shirin doesn't want to worry her with her difficulties at school. This semester all the Year 10s will be doing work experience. Shirin doesn't know what to expect of work experience. She wants to work in a medical centre but doesn't know how to organise this or what she would wear. She thinks it might just be easier to stay at home that week and wonders if she will ever get a job and be able to support her mother.

Resources for further case studies

Voices of Young Australia: Stories of Strong Inspiring Young People, CMY, 2007

Athieng's Story, UNHCR, 2005

Dark Dreams: Australian Refugee Stories by Young Writers Aged 11–20, Wakefield Press, 2004

Pathways and Transitions: Post-compulsory Education, Work and Refugee Young People, CMY, 2008

Taking Action ©VFST, 2004



