Reconsidering Deindividualization: Co-Learning with Refugee Students Towards Inclusive Education in Australian Secondary Schools

John Kirwa Tum Kole

Department of Arts and Education

Deakin University, Melbourne, Australian

E-mail: jkole2002@yahoo.com

Abstract

Global refugee displacement has risen sharply in recent years, with children comprising nearly half of all refugees worldwide. In Australia, despite strong policy commitments to equity and multiculturalism, refugee-background students in secondary schools continue to face systemic barriers such as linguistic marginalization, deficit-based discourses, and cultural deindividualization.

This study examines how deindividualization manifests within inclusive education practices and explores how learning with and from refugee students can foster more relational and transformative models of inclusion. This study addresses the research question: How can refugee-background students and educators collaboratively co-construct inclusive educational practices that resist deindividualization and cultivate relational, transformative learning?

Using a systematic literature review guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, seventeen peer-reviewed studies (2020–2025) were thematically analysed through the lenses of critical pedagogy, recognition theory, and transformative learning. Findings reveal ongoing tensions between inclusive policy rhetoric and classroom realities. Three interrelated themes emerged: (1) experiences of deindividualization and "othering," (2) relational inclusion grounded in empathy, agency, and co-learning, and (3) transformative learning as a pedagogical and institutional process. Creative and embodied practices—such as arts-based learning and sport—were identified as powerful catalysts for belonging, identity affirmation, and social connection.

The study concludes that genuine inclusion demands a systemic and ethical reorientation of

education—from teaching refugees to learning with refugees. It calls for participatory, mixed-method research and culturally sustaining pedagogies that bridge policy and practice, positioning schools as transformative spaces of empathy, recognition, and shared humanity.

Keywords: Refugee students, inclusive education, deindividualization, relational pedagogy, transformative learning, Australia

1. Introduction

Global refugee migration has reached unprecedented levels, with children now comprising nearly half of all displaced populations. This demographic shift has increased cultural and linguistic diversity in schools worldwide, generating both opportunities and challenges for adaptation and learning. In this study, the term refugee refers to "people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025a). Of the estimated 42.7 million refugees globally by the end of 2024, over 13 million were under the age of 18—representing a 41% increase since 2009 (UNHCR, 2025b). Despite this rise, educational access remains deeply inequitable: only 63% of school-aged refugees attend primary school, and just 24% reach secondary education (UNHCR, 2019). These disparities underscore a widening global education gap disproportionately affecting refugee children.

The UNHCR's Education 2030 Strategy highlights the imperative of equitable access to quality education as both a human right and a foundation for resilience, social cohesion, and long-term integration (UNHCR, 2019). Education functions not merely as protection but as a means of rebuilding lives and fostering belonging. Yet, as Hemon (2014) observes, societal prejudices often sustain dehumanizing and homogenizing representations of refugees as an anonymous mass. Vilanova et al. (2017), building on Zimbardo's (1969) notion of deindividuation, describe this as a socio-psychological process that erodes individuality and self-awareness, reducing persons to collective identities that obscure their humanity.

Despite policy-level commitments to inclusion, structural barriers continue to constrain refugee learners' educational experiences. These include insufficient linguistic support for multilingual students (García & Sylvan, 2011) and curricula that fail to reflect refugee students' cultural identities or experiences (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017). Such conditions perpetuate schooling environments that marginalize rather than empower, reinforcing narratives of deficiency rather than resilience.

Addressing these challenges requires reconceptualizing inclusion as a transformative commitment rather than a procedural goal. This involves developing pedagogical and institutional approaches that affirm the cultural, linguistic, and experiential heterogeneity of refugee learners. Meaningful inclusion must thus challenge deficit discourses, build culturally responsive curricula, and strengthen multilingual supports to create educational spaces that are equitable and humanizing.

In Australia, these global challenges resonate deeply. While the nation maintains a robust humanitarian resettlement program, refugee-background students often face barriers such as disrupted schooling, linguistic disadvantage, and racialized exclusion (Baak, 2019; Matthews,

2021). Although policy frameworks emphasize multiculturalism and equity, practice frequently falls short of these ideals (Baak et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2022).

Recent scholarship argues that genuine inclusion extends beyond access to encompass belonging, recognition, and agency (Kaukko, Wilkinson, & Kohli, 2022). As Block et al. (2014) note, teachers play a pivotal role in shaping classroom climates that either reinforce or resist marginalization. Yet, persistent monocultural pedagogies and limited pastoral supports continue to undermine engagement (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017; García & Sylvan, 2011).

Thus, the central issue is not whether refugee students attend school, but how schools learn with and from them—transforming policies and practices to recognize their individuality, agency, and cultural wealth. Reimagining inclusion as a reciprocal process positions refugee learners not as passive recipients but as co-creators of educational transformation.

1.1 Refugee Education in Australia's Secondary Schools

Despite Australia's policy commitment to multiculturalism and equity, research consistently highlights the ongoing marginalization of refugee-background students in secondary schools. A central mechanism in this process is deindividualization—wherein refugee learners are viewed as a homogenous group defined primarily by displacement, rather than by their distinct identities and aspirations (Baak, 2019; Reid & Mourad, 2024). Standardized approaches often reinforce deficit-based assumptions that obscure students' diverse experiences and capabilities.

Matthews (2021) and Tippett et al. (2024) argue that inclusion efforts frequently operate within a superficial equity discourse that conceals deeper structural and ideological exclusions. Refugee students are often constructed as "problems to be managed," reducing inclusion to a technical process of adjustment rather than a relational and cultural engagement (Miller et al., 2022; Reid & Mourad, 2024). This framing prioritizes behavioural conformity and language proficiency while overlooking the affective and relational dimensions of learning (Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020).

Secondary schools frequently apply uniform support models that ignore the heterogeneity of refugee learners' educational backgrounds and socioemotional needs. As Baak et al. (2023) warn, such one-size-fits-all approaches risk entrenching subtle forms of exclusion within systems ostensibly designed to foster inclusion.

According to Matthews (2021), such dynamics arise from *humanitarian paternalism*—a policy logic that positions refugee learners as passive recipients of support rather than as active participants in their own education. This approach marginalizes student voice and restricts meaningful participation in critical educational processes such as curriculum design, governance, and leadership. Furthermore, homogenizing portrayals of refugee learners obscure important differences in heritage, religion, language, and wellbeing (Keddie, 2012; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012), resulting in policies and practices that are poorly tailored to their diverse needs and experiences (Block et al., 2014; Matthews, 2008).

A transformative shift requires reconceptualizing refugee learners as holders of cultural and epistemic knowledge that enrich school communities (Miller et al., 2024). Genuine inclusion

must move beyond symbolic participation towards pedagogies that are relational, reflexive, and responsive.

1.2 Research Aim and Question

This study investigates the ongoing presence of deindividualization in inclusive education policies and practices within Australian secondary schools. It explores how educators and students from refugee backgrounds can collaboratively develop more relational and transformative approaches to learning. Rather than centering on what is done *to* refugee students, this research emphasizes what can be learned *with* them through shared educational experiences.

Research Question

How can refugee-background students and educators co-construct inclusive educational practices that resist deindividualization and foster relational, transformative learning?

1.3 Why Learning With and From Refugees Matters for Inclusive Transformation

This research advances the concept of relational inclusion—an approach emphasizing mutual learning, recognition, and shared agency between teachers and refugee students (Kaukko, Wilkinson, & Kohli, 2022; Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020). Learning with and from refugees involves recognizing them as active participants whose lived experiences, resilience, and multilingual capacities enrich collective learning (Miller et al., 2024).

Macaulay (2023) finds that refugee youth often experience inclusion as conditional, contingent upon conformity to dominant norms. Ramos (2021) similarly highlights how refugee learners engage in "wilful resistance," asserting their identities and reshaping school cultures. Such findings call for pedagogies that centre student agency and diverse epistemologies of learning.

Drawing on Freire's (1970) concept of dialogical education, learning with refugees reframes classrooms as spaces of co-creation grounded in empathy and mutual respect. As Baak et al. (2023) contend, this requires moving from rhetorical inclusion toward practice transformation—reimagining schools as communities where difference is celebrated as a source of collective enrichment.

Ultimately, learning with and from refugees enables a shift from deindividualization to humanization, aligning education with principles of justice, care, and intercultural understanding. Such transformation benefits all learners by cultivating schools that reflect and value the diversity of contemporary Australian society.

2. Conceptual Framework: From Deindividualization to Relational Inclusion

In refugee education, deindividualization refers to the process by which learners are perceived not as unique individuals but as members of an undifferentiated category ("refugees"). This occurs when schools prioritize categories of trauma, need, or language level over personal identity and aspiration (Baak, 2019; Reid & Mourad, 2024). Within Australian contexts, inclusion policies often unintentionally reinforce this through deficit framings that emphasize remediation and adjustment (Matthews, 2021).

Macaulay (2023) demonstrates that such conditions result in classrooms where students feel "seen but not taught," their presence acknowledged yet their identities overlooked. Deindividualization thus reflects systemic tendencies to equate inclusion with assimilation, perpetuating hierarchies that privilege dominant cultural norms (Miller et al., 2024).

2.1 Theoretical Foundations: Critical Pedagogy, Recognition Theory, and Relational Inclusion

This study integrates three interrelated frameworks—critical pedagogy, recognition theory, and relational inclusion—to reconceptualize inclusion as dialogical and transformative. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) positions education as a space for mutual humanization through dialogue. It challenges teacher-student hierarchies and redefines learning as co-created knowledge.

Recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) provides a moral-philosophical basis for understanding how misrecognition—denial of cultural or personal acknowledgment—produces marginalization. For refugee learners, recognition affirms dignity, identity, and belonging (Miller et al., 2024; Reid & Mourad, 2024). Relational inclusion (Kaukko, Wilkinson, & Kohli, 2022; Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020) extends inclusion beyond participation to emphasize reciprocal, empathetic, and co-constructive relationships. Inclusion thus becomes a practice of pedagogical care and shared agency.

Together, these perspectives frame inclusion not as a procedural outcome but as an ethical relationship grounded in empathy, recognition, and dialogue.

2.2 Transformative Learning as a Framework for Inclusion

Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997, 2018) complements these perspectives by emphasizing critical reflection as the pathway to personal and institutional change. When applied to refugee education, it encourages educators to re-examine deficit narratives and embrace plural epistemologies (Baak et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence from Australia shows that such reflection fosters relational transformation: teachers who view diversity as a resource create spaces of trust and belonging (Sutton et al., 2023), while students' resistance can prompt critical educator reflexivity (Ramos, 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates this continuum—from deindividualization to relational inclusion and finally transformative learning. This model captures a progressive movement from objectification toward a pedagogy rooted in empathy, reciprocity, and shared humanity.
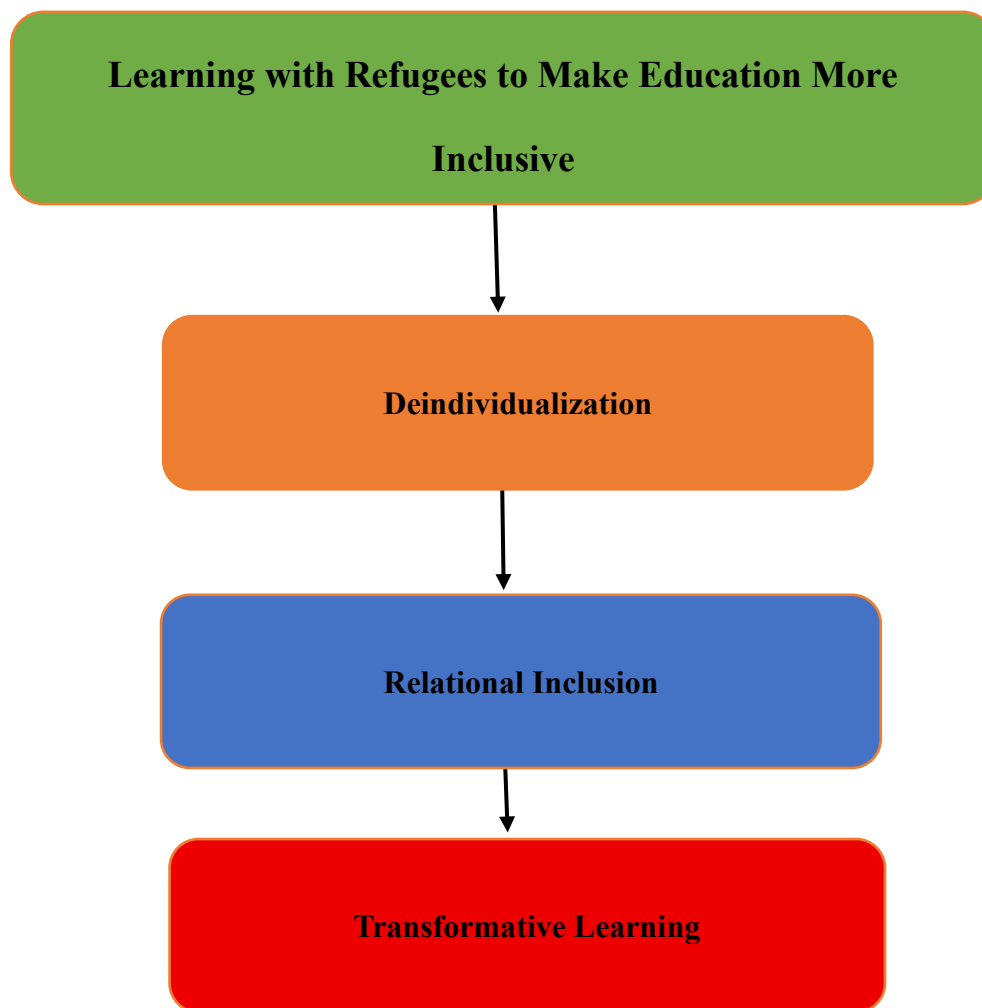
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: From Deindividualization to Transformative Learning through Relational Inclusion in Refugee Education

3. Analysis and Review of the Literature

This review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensuring transparency, methodological rigour, and reproducibility in the selection and synthesis of literature. While PRISMA served as the primary reporting framework, the review was also guided by the Campbell Collaboration's standards for reviews of social and educational interventions, aligning with its focus on inclusive practices in refugee education.

As the sole reviewer, I implemented multiple strategies to mitigate potential bias. A comprehensive review protocol was developed prior to commencing the study, including clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. I maintained an objective focus on study quality, actively sought out contradictory evidence, and employed the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist as a systematic tool for bias assessment. Additionally, I engaged in continuous self-reflection to surface and challenge personal assumptions, and used neutral,

evidence-based language throughout the analysis to preserve analytical integrity.

This review synthesizes contemporary scholarship on the inclusion of refugee-background students in Australian secondary schools, drawing on seventeen peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025. By focusing on this recent period, the review captures current developments in refugee education, policy reform, and pedagogical innovation.

The collective findings highlight persistent tensions between inclusive policy rhetoric and everyday school practice—particularly the continued influence of deindividualization and deficit-based approaches. At the same time, emerging frameworks centred on relational inclusion and transformative learning are gaining traction as counter-narratives. The integration of up-to-date, peer-reviewed evidence not only strengthens the analytical validity of this review but also situates it within broader educational and sociocultural conversations around equity, belonging, and justice. Ultimately, this synthesis contributes to advancing our understanding of how inclusive education can move beyond compliance-driven models toward dialogical, humanizing, and equity-oriented practices in Australian schools.

3.1 Methodology: Search Strategy, Screening and Selection, Data Extraction and Coding

A systematic search was undertaken across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, APA PsycINFO, Informit, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar. The following search terms and Boolean operators were used: ("refugee students" OR "asylum seekers" OR "migrant students") AND ("inclusive education" OR "educational inclusion" OR "inclusive pedagogy") AND ("deindividualization" OR "student identity" OR "student voice") AND ("Australia" OR "Australian secondary schools").

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (a) focused on school-based education within the Australian context; (b) were published in peer-reviewed journals; (c) explicitly examined issues of inclusion, pedagogy, or learner identity among refugee-background students; and (d) were written in English.

The 2020–2025 timeframe captures critical shifts in refugee education, inclusive policy, and pedagogy. The post-COVID era prompted renewed focus on equity and trauma-informed practices, while national and global movements for social justice have reshaped how inclusion is framed. Recent Australian policy developments and pedagogical innovations emphasize co-design and cultural responsiveness, making this period especially relevant for understanding current challenges and opportunities in refugee-inclusive education (Kole, 2025).

In addition to peer-reviewed journal articles, key institutional and policy reports—such as those published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET), the Victoria Department of Education and Training (Vic DET), and the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN)—were included to strengthen the empirical and policy relevance of the review. These reports provide current data, strategic frameworks, and policy analyses that situate refugee education within broader governance and institutional contexts, ensuring that the review reflects both theoretical insights and applied policy dimensions.

Select foundational works (e.g., Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1997) were also incorporated to provide historical and theoretical continuity, tracing the evolution of inclusive education and refugee policy in Australia. Including both contemporary and foundational literature enabled a longitudinal perspective, linking historical policy trajectories with emerging culturally sustaining approaches in refugee education.

This integration of scholarly, institutional, and historical sources established a comprehensive and contextually grounded evidence base, illuminating how international frameworks for inclusion and equity are translated into state-level educational practices and policy design.

As summarized in **Table 1**, the search initially identified 197 studies, with 29 duplicates removed. After screening 168 titles and abstracts, 100 records were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria. A total of 68 full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility, with 51 excluded based on relevance or scope. Ultimately, 17 studies met the final selection criteria and were included in the synthesis.

Table 1. Study Identification and Selection Process

Phase	Process Description	Number of Records
Identification	Records identified through database searching (*Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, APA PsycINFO, Informit, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar*)	197
	Duplicates removed	29
Screening	Titles and abstracts screened	168
	Records excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria (e.g., non-Australian context, non-school setting, non-peer-reviewed)	100
Eligibility	Full-text articles retrieved and assessed for eligibility	68
	Full-text articles excluded (e.g., insufficient focus on inclusion, pedagogy, or identity)	51
Inclusion	Studies included in qualitative synthesis / analysis	17

Table 2 presents seventeen peer-reviewed studies that most closely align with the theme of

inclusive learning with and from refugees. Collectively, these studies highlight the significance of dialogical relationships, mutual learning, and transformative pedagogical practices in fostering authentic and sustainable inclusion.

Table 2. Seventeen Studies and Their Relevance to the Topic

Reference	Relevance to Topic
Baak, M., Miller, E., Johnson, B., & Sullivan, A. (2023). *Structure and agency in the development of education policies for refugee-background students.*	Explores the tension between policy and refugee agency—central for "disputing" systemic deindividualization.
Baak, M., McDonald, S., Johnson, B., & Sullivan, A. (2023). *Why school context matters in refugee education.*	Context-sensitive look at inclusion practices—core to building "learning with" refugees.
Baak, M., Tippett, N., Johnson, B., Brown, J., & Sullivan, A. (2021). *Refugee education in Australian secondary schools: An overview of current practices*	Essential background on inclusivity practices across Australian secondary schools.
Macaulay, L. (2023). *"She just saw me—She didn't teach me": Sudanese youth perspectives on teacher–student relationships.*	Critical voice from refugee students on recognition and individualization in learning.
Matthews, J. (2021). *Maligned mobilities, absences and emergencies: Refugee education in Australia.*	Theorizes exclusionary educational discourses; relevant to "deindividualization."
Miller, E., Ziaian, T., Baak, M., & de Anstiss, H. (2024). *Recognition of refugee students' cultural wealth and social capital in resettlement.*	Advocates asset-based approaches that counter deficit and deindividualized views.
Miller, E., Ziaian, T., de Anstiss, H., & Baak, M. (2022). *Practices for inclusion, structures of marginalization: Experiences of refugee background students in Australian secondary schools*	Illuminates the tensions between inclusive intent and exclusionary structure in schools.

Tippett, N., Baak, M., Johnson, B., & Sullivan, A. (2024). *What is 'fair' and 'just' in refugee education?*	Explores equity and justice discourses—conceptually linked to inclusive transformation.
Ramos, F. (2021). *Academic success as willful resistance*	Uses refugee students' narratives to theorize resistance against homogenization.
Burke, R., & Field, R. S. (2023). *Arts-based approaches to languages education with refugee learners*	Creative pedagogies that centre refugee agency—valuable for inclusive practice examples.
Harwood, G. et al. (2024). *The Basketball Boys.*	Ethnographic insights into identity-making and inclusion/exclusion in high school contexts.
Odhiambo, G. (2025). *Creating a supporting environment in schools for students with refugee backgrounds in Australia.*	Directly addresses school-level inclusion practices and support mechanisms.
Sutton, D., Kearney, A., & Ashton, K. (2023). *Improving educational inclusion for refugee-background learners.*	Evidence-based approaches for cultivating inclusive learning environments.
Louise, K. (2023). *A tri-menu model of learning to support young refugees' cultural wellbeing.*	Presents inclusive pedagogical models that recognize individuality and belonging.
Reid, C., & Mourad, Z. (2024). *Constructing 'good refugees' and the ensuing equity issues in Australian schools.*	Critiques the moral regulation of refugees in education—perfect for deindividualization debates.
Wilkinson, J., & Kaukko, M. (2020). *Educational leading as pedagogical love:*	Argues that educational leadership, when grounded in pedagogical love, can disrupt performative systems and enable inclusive, humanizing schooling for refugee students
Kaukko, M., Wilkinson, J., & Kohli, R. K. (2022). *Pedagogical love in Finland and Australia:*	Pedagogical love is not sentimentality—it is an ethical, relational, and professional stance that helps refugee learners rebuild identity and belonging in school.

Data were extracted and analysed using a thematic coding framework that organized findings into four interrelated domains: (1) policy and practice developments in refugee education; (2) processes of deindividualization and "othering" within schooling contexts; (3) pedagogical approaches that foreground student voice, agency, and relational inclusion; and (4) transformative learning as a pathway to systemic educational change.

The coding process was iterative, interpretive, and reflexive, enabling themes to emerge organically through close and critical engagement with the literature. The analysis emphasized the relational, cultural, and political dimensions of inclusion, drawing on critical and postcolonial educational frameworks to interrogate how power, recognition, and belonging are negotiated in refugee education contexts. This approach ensured that inclusion was conceptualized not merely as a policy objective but as a dynamic, socially situated process shaped by interactions, identities, and institutional structures.

Table 3 presents the literature matrix summarizing the seventeen most relevant studies. It details each study's focus, methodology, participants, and key findings, highlighting their contributions to the central themes of inclusion, individuality, and learning with refugees.

Table 3. Literature Matrix – Inclusion and Deindividualization in Refugee Education

Author/Year	Title	Research Focus	Methodology	Participants/Context	Key Findings (Relevance to Topic)
Baak et al. (2023a)	Why school context matters in refugee education	Examines how local school contexts shape refugee inclusion experiences	Mixed methods; case studies across schools	Refugee students and educators	Context shapes inclusion: individualized supports improve belonging
Baak et al. (2023b)	Structure and agency in the development of education policies for refugee-background students	Analyses education policy frameworks and their impact on refugee students' agency	Policy analysis & interviews	Education policymakers, refugee educators	Policy often limits individuality; advocates for agency-driven inclusion
Macaulay (2023)	'She just saw me—She didn't teach me'	Student narratives on teacher–student relationships and recognition	Qualitative; narrative inquiry	Sudanese and South Sudanese youth	Highlights how lack of relational engagement reproduces deindividualization
Ramos (2021)	Academic success as	Explores resistance	Narrative inquiry;	Refugee-background students in Australian	Theorizes agency as counteraction to

	wilful resistance	strategies among refugee students in response to marginalization	participatory approach	high schools	deindividualization
Miller et al., 2022	Practices for inclusion, structures of marginalization: Experiences of refugee background students in Australian secondary schools	Investigates how school structures and everyday practices influence the educational inclusion of refugee-background students	Qualitative; semi-structured interview and focus groups	Refugee students; teachers; school leaders; support staff	While schools aim to promote inclusion, institutional practices often reproduce marginalisation through deficit-based assumptions and rigid systems of support
Reid & Mourad (2024)	Constructing 'good refugees' and the ensuing equity issues in Australian schools	Critiques moralizing discourses of the 'ideal refugee' in education	Critical discourse analysis	School leaders and policy documents	Shows how 'good refugee' narratives homogenize identities; advocates equity reform
Miller et al. (2024)	Recognition of refugee students' cultural wealth and social capital	Explores asset-based recognition of refugee students' contributions	Mixed methods; participatory research	Refugee secondary students in Australia	Counters deficit framing by valuing refugee cultural wealth
Tippett et al. (2024)	What is 'fair' and 'just' in refugee education?	Investigates competing discourses of equity and equality in schools	Qualitative; interviews with teachers & leaders	Australian school leaders and teachers	Highlights moral tensions and justice discourses in inclusive education
Wilkinson & Kaukko (2020)	Educational leading as pedagogical love	Proposes 'pedagogical love' as an inclusive leadership model	Theoretical; case study	Refugee education leaders	Reframes inclusion through relational care and mutual learning
Matthews (2021)	Maligned mobilities, absences and emergencies: Refugee education in Australia	Critiques crisis framings in refugee education discourse	Critical conceptual paper	N/A (theoretical analysis)	Argues for structural change to re-humanize refugee learners
Sutton et al. (2023)	Improving educational	Explores practices	Empirical study;	Teachers and refugee-background learners	Evidence-based inclusive practices

	inclusion for refugee-background learners	enhancing inclusion and belonging	multi-site survey		emphasize diversity recognition
Burke, & Field, (2023).	Arts-based approaches to languages education with refugee learners	Explores arts-based approaches to language education for refugee and asylum-seeker background learners	Scoping Review based on Arksey & O'Malley's (2005) methodological framework.	The review targets early childhood and primary-aged refugee learners.	Arts-based approaches empower refugee learners to participate as active co-creators of meaning, identity, and language knowledge.
Louise (2023)	A tri-menu model of learning to support young refugees' cultural wellbeing	Proposes framework for culturally responsive learning	Theoretical/practical model	Refugee youth (secondary context)	Advocates differentiated, participatory pedagogy centred on refugee voice
Harwood et al. (2024)	The Basketball Boys	Explores identity, masculinity, and belonging in refugee youth groups	Ethnographic study	Young men from refugee backgrounds in a state high school	Symbolic expression of resistance and belonging; humanizing identity work
Odhiambo (2025)	Creating a supporting environment in schools for students with refugee backgrounds	Analyses how schools cultivate supportive and inclusive environments	Qualitative; multiple case studies	School administrators and refugee-background students	Identifies inclusive structures fostering belonging and learning partnerships
Kaukko, Wilkinson, & Kohli, (2022).	Pedagogical love in Finland and Australia	Investigates how teachers in Finland and Australia support refugee children through an approach the authors conceptualize as	Qualitative, comparative case study across Finland and Australia	Teachers and refugee children in early schooling contexts.	Pedagogical love is not sentimentality—it is an ethical, relational, and professional stance that helps refugee learners rebuild identity and belonging in school.

	"pedagogic al love.			
Baak et al. (2021)	Refugee education in Australian secondary schools: Overview of current practices	Comprehen sive overview of secondary school inclusion strategies	Policy and program review	Australian secondary schools	Baseline data for inclusive practice and systemic challenges

4. Results from the Literature

This section outlines the key themes that emerged from the synthesis of recent literature (2020–2025) on refugee education and inclusion in Australia. As shown in **Figure 1**, the analysis identifies four interrelated themes: (1) refugee education and inclusion in Australia; (2) deindividualization and "othering" in schooling; (3) learning with refugees through voice, agency, and relational pedagogy; and (4) progression towards transformative learning.
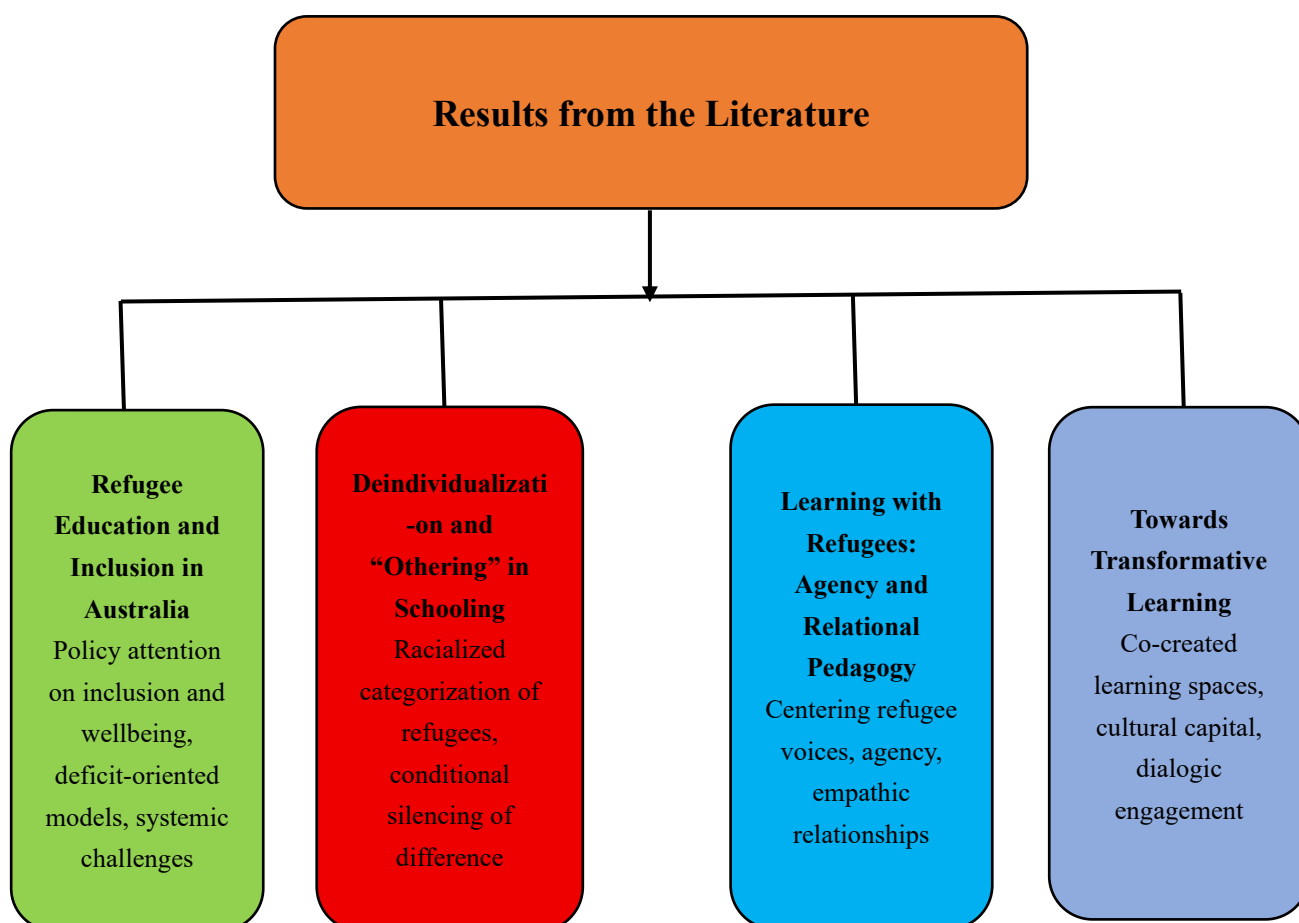

Figure 1. Key Themes Emerging from the Literature on Refugee Education and Inclusion in Australia

Together, these themes illustrate an evolving educational landscape—one that is gradually, though unevenly, shifting from bureaucratic and compliance-based forms of inclusion toward relational and transformative practices.

4.1 Refugee Education and Inclusion in Australia

In Australia, education policy increasingly emphasizes inclusion, wellbeing, and multicultural values (Baak et al., 2021; Matthews, 2021). However, implementation on the ground often remains shaped by deficit-based and compliance-driven models. These models tend to prioritize language acquisition, behavioural management, and academic achievement, often at the expense of culturally responsive/sustaining and relational engagement with refugee-background learners.

At the systemic level, teachers encounter significant challenges in balancing institutional mandates with the diverse socio-emotional and linguistic needs of refugee students (Miller et al., 2022; Tippett et al., 2024). Rigid curricula, reliance on standardized testing, and limited pre-service training in refugee education constrain pedagogical innovation. Odhiambo (2025) highlights that the quality of inclusion is significantly influenced by school climate—specifically, leadership commitment, collaborative staff cultures, and trust-based relationships with refugee families. Schools that provide culturally safe, emotionally supportive environments demonstrate improved student engagement and wellbeing. However, these inclusive conditions remain inconsistently implemented, with disparities in resources, high teacher workloads, and insufficient intercultural training threatening the sustainability of inclusive practices.

As an alternative, Louise (2023) proposes a "tri-menu" model for curriculum design that fosters cultural wellbeing by embedding flexibility, choice, and student agency. Grounded in Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, this model frames inclusion as a moral imperative, where misrecognition—the failure to affirm cultural identity—serves to marginalize refugee students further. Collectively, these perspectives underscore a persistent disjuncture between policy rhetoric and classroom realities, calling for participatory, culturally sustaining, and reflexive models of inclusion that affirm the dignity, identity, and agency of refugee learners.

Figure 2 visualizes changes in refugee students' academic performance in Australia between 2020 and 2025, annotated with key policy and pedagogical developments. Although a formal National Refugee Education Strategy was not introduced during this period, both national and state-level efforts broadly aligned with the UNHCR's Education 2030 Strategy, which promotes access, inclusion, and lifelong learning for displaced populations (UNHCR, 2019a). Complementing this global framework, the Stepping Up: Refugee Education in Crisis report highlights persistent international barriers to educational access, continuity, and quality for refugee learners, reinforcing the need for equity-focused policy coordination (UNHCR, 2019b).

Domestically, the MYAN (2019) and the Education Roundtable (2019–2020) reports identified systemic gaps in supporting refugee and migrant students, further exacerbated by the compounded impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning continuity and wellbeing. At the state level, targeted initiatives continued. In New South Wales, the DET (2024) sustained the

New Arrivals Program (NAP) and Intensive English Centres (IECs), delivering crucial transition and language support. Simultaneously, in Victoria, the DET (2025) expanded the Refugee Education Support Program (RESP), embedding culturally responsive practices across schools. Additionally, the Trauma-Informed Pedagogy Framework—as embodied by the Berry Street Education Model—and the Tri-Menu Model for Cultural Wellbeing contributed to more relational, trauma-informed, and culturally grounded approaches to refugee education (Louise, 2023).

Overall, the trend captured in **Figure 2** reflects gradual improvement in refugee students' academic outcomes between 2020 and 2025. These gains appear closely tied to inclusive, relational practices, though progress has been uneven due to persistent resource limitations, policy fragmentation, and systemic inequities.

Despite these trends, a publicly available, continuous graph specifically charting refugee students' academic fluctuations over time does not exist. While broader data shows that migrant students tend to perform well, refugee students face distinct barriers—such as interrupted education, trauma, and limited English proficiency—that often result in lower school completion rates compared to national averages (Naidoo et al., 2018; Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). Research indicates that academic outcomes and language skills generally improve with time spent in Australia (Abkhezr, McMahon, & Rossouw, 2015). However, the lack of consistent, disaggregated national data—particularly in tools like NAPLAN—makes it difficult to monitor longitudinal trends for this group (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012). The Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) longitudinal study provides valuable insights into humanitarian migrants' educational progress, but it does not visualize these trends in a way that captures performance fluctuations over time (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021).
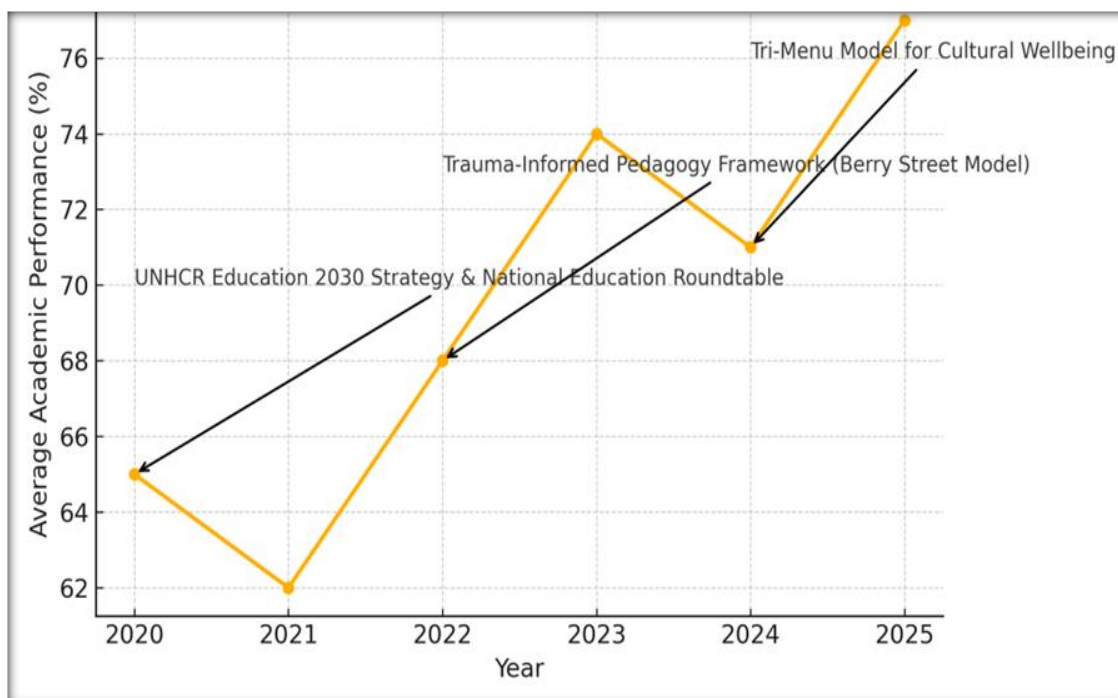

Figure 2. *Trends and Policy Milestones in Refugee Education (2020–2025)*

4.2 Deindividualization and "Othering" in Schooling

Research consistently identifies deindividualization and "othering" as enduring features of refugee education discourse. Reid and Mourad (2024) reveal how refugee learners are frequently perceived through racialized and homogenizing frameworks that erase individuality and agency. This framing sustains the "good refugee" narrative, imposing moral expectations of gratitude, compliance, and resilience while silencing difference and autonomy.

Building on this critique, Harwood et al. (2024), in their ethnographic study *The Basketball Boys*—which examines young men from refugee backgrounds in an Australian state high school—reveal how processes of deindividualization and othering operate within everyday school interactions. The study shows that these students are often collectively perceived through racialized and homogenizing stereotypes that frame them as outsiders within the school community. Yet, in response to these deficit constructions, the young men use swagger and embodied performance as symbolic acts of resistance—reclaiming visibility, asserting pride and masculinity, and constructing alternative forms of belonging. Through this lens, Harwood et al. demonstrate that inclusion in schools is not merely structural but deeply performative, negotiated through the interplay of recognition, identity, and social perception.

Overall, the literature depicts inclusion as paradoxical—simultaneously a promise of belonging and a mechanism of control. Genuine inclusion requires recognizing agency and individuality beyond the confines of bureaucratic categorization.

4.3 Learning with Refugees: Voice, Agency, and Relational Pedagogy

A complementary body of scholarship challenges deindividualizing narratives by centering student voice, agency, and relational pedagogy. Ramos (2021) and Macaulay (2023) illustrate how refugee youth reinterpret their educational identities through storytelling, narrative inquiry, and acts of self-advocacy. These narratives function as counter-discourses, reclaiming agency and reasserting self-definition in systems that often silence them.

Relational approaches to inclusion, articulated by Wilkinson and Kaukko (2020) and Kaukko, Wilkinson, and Kohli (2022), emphasize empathy, reciprocity, and shared humanity as the foundation for meaningful learning. Although situated in early-years education, Burke and Field (2023) extend this framework through arts-based language pedagogy, demonstrating how creative collaboration fosters "spaces of hope" where teachers and students co-construct meaning beyond linguistic and cultural divides. These participatory environments validate emotion, imagination, and identity as integral components of learning.

Extending this perspective, Odhiambo (2025) illustrates that relational inclusion is not confined to classroom interactions but is embedded within the broader ethos and culture of the whole school community. Schools that embed shared responsibility for inclusion across leadership, teachers, and support staff—and integrate refugee students' linguistic and cultural knowledge into decision-making—foster stronger community belonging and student participation. Such relational ecosystems demonstrate that inclusion thrives when school communities "learn with," rather than merely teach, refugee learners—acknowledging their contributions as essential to collective learning.

Together, these studies reframe inclusion as a dialogical process grounded in mutual recognition, where teachers and students co-construct learning spaces that resist deficit thinking and cultivate authentic belonging.

4.4 Towards Transformative Learning

Recent scholarship extends the discussion beyond relational inclusion toward transformative learning, where both educators and students undergo mutual growth through reflection, empathy, and dialogue. For example, Miller et al. (2024) and Tippett et al. (2024) argue that authentic inclusion requires co-created pedagogical spaces built on trust, cultural recognition, and critical reflection. These approaches draw from Freire's (1970) notion of critical consciousness and Mezirow's (1997, 2018) transformative learning theory, emphasizing education's humanizing potential.

Reinforcing this perspective, Odhiambo (2025) shows that the development of transformative learning environments is contingent upon reflexive leadership and the cultivation of collaborative, inclusive school cultures. When school leaders and teachers engage meaningfully with refugee students and families—through mentoring, peer networks, and culturally responsive policies—schools transition from reactive inclusion to proactive transformation. Such practices foster intercultural understanding and strengthen both teacher and student agency.

Operationalizing this vision, Louise (2023) presents a tri-menu learning model that facilitates personalized, flexible, and culturally embedded educational pathways for refugee-background students. Similarly, Burke and Field (2023) show how arts-based methodologies transform classrooms into ecosystems of empathy and creativity, while Harwood et al. (2024) illustrate how embodied cultural practices such as sport function as transformative spaces of empowerment and recognition.

Collectively, these studies signal a paradigm shift—from inclusion as access to inclusion as transformation. They reimagine schools not as sites of assimilation but as co-created communities of learning, where educators and students engage in shared processes of reflection, empathy, and renewal.

5. Discussion and Recommendations

The synthesis of eighteen recent studies (2020–2025) reveals a complex and, at times, contradictory landscape of refugee inclusion within Australian secondary education. While policy discourses increasingly emphasize equity, belonging, and wellbeing, everyday schooling practices continue to expose deep tensions between bureaucratic forms of inclusion and more relational, transformative approaches.

Across the reviewed literature, three interrelated themes consistently emerge: (1) experiences of deindividualization, illustrating how systemic and pedagogical practices often obscure refugee students' individuality and agency; (2) relational inclusion as a counter-discourse, emphasizing empathy, recognition, and co-learning as the foundations of authentic belonging; and (3) learning with refugees as transformative practice, positioning education as a site of

mutual growth, critical reflection, and intercultural understanding (see **Table 5**).

Refugee students' academic performance in Australia between 2020 and 2025 reflects persistent tensions between policy intent and practice, with periods of improvement aligning with relational, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive/sustaining reforms, followed by temporary declines associated with systemic fragmentation and resource constraints (see **Figure 2**). Although no formal National Refugee Education Strategy was implemented during this period, national and state-level initiatives broadly aligned with the UNHCR's Education 2030 Strategy emphasised inclusion, access, and wellbeing. National reports highlighted enduring inequities and the compounding effects of COVID-19 on learning continuity, while state-based responses—including the New Arrivals Program and Intensive English Centres in New South Wales, the expansion of Victoria's Refugee Education Support Program, and the adoption of trauma-informed and cultural wellbeing frameworks such as the Berry Street Education Model and the Tri-Menu Model—sought to strengthen inclusive practice. The overall trend underscores a central finding of this review: sustained academic improvement is most evident when policy, pedagogy, and relational care operate coherently, but falters when support remains fragmented or compliance-driven.

These themes are further deepened by recent contributions that explore inclusion through diverse modalities: identity formation and embodied belonging in sport (Harwood et al., 2024), creative co-learning and expression through arts-based pedagogy (Burke & Field, 2023), and cultural wellbeing supported by adaptive curriculum design (Louise, 2023). Collectively, these studies reconceptualize inclusion not as a static policy objective but as a dynamic, dialogical process rooted in co-creation, relational ethics, and mutual transformation.

Table 5. Summary of Key Themes and Supporting Studies (2020–2025)

Theme	Key Focus Areas	Supporting Studies (2020–2025)	Analytical Insight
Experiences of Deindividualization in Secondary Schools	Homogenizing practices; deficit discourses; experiences of exclusion and identity suppression.	Matthews (2021); Reid & Mourad (2024); Miller et al. (2022); Tippett et al. (2024); Macaulay (2023); Ramos (2021)	Inclusion framed through bureaucratic logic often reproduces exclusion, positioning refugee learners within deficit narratives.
Relational Inclusion as a Counter-Discourse	Teacher–student co-learning; recognition of cultural wealth; student voice and agency.	Wilkinson & Kaukko (2022); Kaukko, Wilkinson & Kohli, (2022); Miller et al. (2024); Baak et al. (2023); Burke & Field (2023); Ramos (2021); Macaulay (2023); Odhiambo (2025)	Relational inclusion humanizes education by positioning teachers and students as co-learners within dialogical and creative relationships.

| Learning with Refugees as Transformative Practice | Mutual transformation; empathy and critical reflection; leadership and systemic support. | Wilkinson & Kaukko (2020); Miller et al. (2024); Tippett et al. (2024); Ramos (2021); Matthews (2021); Louise (2023); Harwood et al. (2024) | Transformative learning reframes inclusion as a reciprocal process of empathy, critical reflection, and institutional change. |

5.1 Experiences of Deindividualization in Secondary Schools

Across the reviewed literature, refugee-background students are frequently positioned within homogenizing and deficit-oriented discourses that obscure their individuality and agency. Matthews (2021) and Reid and Mourad (2024) illustrate how institutional practices—such as categorizing students by English proficiency or trauma background—reduce complex identities to administrative classifications. Even well-intentioned inclusion initiatives often prioritize adjustment and remediation over recognition and co-learning (Miller et al., 2022; Tippett et al., 2024).

Conversely, Harwood et al. (2024) demonstrate how refugee students actively resist these deficit framings through embodied and cultural practices. In their ethnographic study The Basketball Boys, young men from refugee backgrounds use sport and swagger as symbolic expressions of pride, solidarity, and belonging. These performative acts challenge reductive narratives, reasserting agency and visibility within educational spaces that often marginalize difference. Harwood et al.'s findings highlight that genuine inclusion extends beyond academic adjustment to encompass social, embodied, and cultural dimensions of identity and recognition.

5.2 Relational Inclusion as a Counter-Discourse

In response to persistent deindividualizing tendencies in refugee education, a growing body of scholarship advances relational inclusion as a counter-discourse grounded in empathy, care, and co-learning. Wilkinson and Kaukko (2020) conceptualize pedagogical love as an ethical stance through which belonging is co-constructed rather than administratively assigned, emphasizing that inclusion emerges through relationships, not regulation—anchored in trust, reciprocity, and humanizing pedagogy.

Extending this perspective, Odhiambo (2025) empirically demonstrates that supportive school environments—characterized by collaboration among teachers, counsellors, and refugee education aides—cultivate belonging and relational trust. His findings suggest that inclusion is most effective when enacted as a whole-school ethic rather than as a collection of isolated initiatives. Schools that prioritize relational care and community engagement are thus better positioned to dismantle deficit narratives and empower refugee learners as active participants in educational life.

Similarly, Burke and Field (2023) highlight the transformative potential of arts-based and creative pedagogies, showing how collaborative artistic practices create "spaces of hope"

where refugee-background students can express identity, voice, and emotion beyond linguistic boundaries. These creative spaces validate multiple literacies and modes of being, embodying relational inclusion in tangible form.

Further, Baak et al. (2023) and Miller et al. (2024) demonstrate that when educators draw upon students' cultural wealth—including multilingualism, resilience, and community knowledge—refugee learners are repositioned as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients. In the same vein, Ramos (2021) and Macaulay (2023) show how dialogical engagement transforms inclusion into a reciprocal process, enabling both teachers and students to grow through empathy, reflection, and mutual recognition.

5.3 Learning with Refugee Students: Transformative Practice and the Reimagining of Inclusion

The third theme extends the notion of relational inclusion toward a framework of transformative learning, in which both educators and refugee-background students undergo profound shifts in consciousness, empathy, and perspective. Drawing on Freire's (1970) dialogical pedagogy and Mezirow's (1997, 2018) transformative learning theory, several studies (Kaukko & Wilkinson, 2020; Miller et al., 2024; Tippett et al., 2024) illustrate how critical reflection and dialogical relationships can disrupt hierarchical and exclusionary school cultures, fostering more equitable and participatory learning environments.

Advancing this vision, Louise (2023) introduces a tri-menu model of learning that prioritizes cultural wellbeing and provides flexible pathways responsive to the diverse needs of refugee students. This model operationalizes transformative inclusion by embedding choice, identity, and wellbeing into curriculum design. Similarly, Harwood et al. (2024) highlight the transformative potential of non-traditional learning forms, such as sport, which can serve as catalysts for mutual transformation—building confidence, cultural pride, and intercultural understanding among both teachers and students.

Conceptualizing this process as a "pedagogical awakening," Ramos (2021) describes how educators cultivate critical reflexivity, shifting from corrective to collaborative approaches to teaching. In this dynamic, refugee learners experience empowerment through recognition as equal partners in the learning process (Macaulay, 2023). Leadership also plays a pivotal role: inclusive leaders foster school cultures that sustain reflective, relational, and justice-oriented practices (Matthews, 2021; Tippett et al., 2024).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that transformative inclusion transcends notions of access and accommodation. It reimagines education as a shared ethical and humanizing process, where learning becomes co-constructed through empathy, critical awareness, and mutual respect. The trajectory evident across the literature—from bureaucratic classification to relational transformation—redefines schools as spaces of co-creation, compassion, and educational justice.

5.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While the literature from 2020 to 2025 offers substantial theoretical and practical insights, several key research gaps limit the broader impact and generalisability of current findings.

Most studies rely on small-scale qualitative designs—case studies, ethnographies, and arts-based inquiries—which provide rich, context-specific understandings of refugee students' experiences (Burke & Field, 2023; Harwood et al., 2024; Ramos, 2021). However, these approaches constrain the scalability of their findings. There is a pressing need for longitudinal and mixed-method research that can assess the sustained impacts of inclusive practices on academic achievement, wellbeing, and community integration.

Conceptually, while scholars often draw on critical frameworks such as pedagogical love (Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020), critical consciousness (Tippett et al., 2024), and cultural wellbeing (Louise, 2023), these ideas are typically applied in isolation. This fragmented usage limits the development of a cohesive, integrated model of transformative inclusion that can inform both policy and professional practice. Addressing this requires greater theoretical synthesis across disciplines, bridging critical pedagogy, intercultural education, and trauma-informed approaches.

Additionally, the evidence base is heavily skewed toward urban secondary schooling contexts, leaving early childhood, rural, and post-secondary settings underexplored (Burke & Field, 2023; Matthews, 2021). This narrow focus restricts understanding of how inclusion is enacted across the full diversity of Australian education, and how regional, linguistic, and community-specific factors shape refugee learners' experiences.

A further limitation lies in the underrepresentation of refugee families, education support staff, and community organisations in research. While many studies rightly foreground student agency (Macaulay, 2023; Ramos, 2021), the broader social and cultural ecosystems that contribute to inclusion are often excluded. This narrows the conception of inclusion to individual classroom dynamics, rather than positioning it as a whole-school and community-based process.

Finally, although creative and embodied pedagogies—such as sport, storytelling, and arts-based methods—are gaining attention, there is insufficient research on how these practices can be institutionalised through teacher education, leadership development, and curriculum design (Harwood et al., 2024; Louise, 2023). The gap between innovative practice and systemic uptake remains wide. Moreover, inclusion continues to be evaluated through compliance-based metrics such as access and academic achievement, with limited consideration of relational indicators like belonging, agency, and cultural recognition (Matthews, 2021; Tippett et al., 2024).

Taken together, these limitations underscore the need for future research that is participatory, longitudinal, and theoretically integrative. Such research should not only broaden the contexts and stakeholders involved but also push toward institutionalising relational and transformative pedagogies within policy and practice.

6. Implications and Recommendations

The collective findings from 2020–2025 reveal both the promise and paradox of refugee inclusion in Australian secondary education. While policy frameworks champion multiculturalism and equity, practice often lags behind, constrained by deficit logics and

compliance-driven cultures. The following recommendations outline strategies for educators, policymakers, and leaders to advance from procedural inclusion toward transformative, relational, and humanizing approaches.

6.1 Pedagogical Implications: Humanizing Inclusive Education

At the classroom level, research calls for a shift from instrumental inclusion—focused narrowly on language acquisition or behaviour—to humanizing pedagogy that affirms identity, creativity, and voice (Burke & Field, 2023; Ramos, 2021; Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020). Teachers who practice relational inclusion cultivate belonging through empathy, co-learning, and shared vulnerability (Macaulay, 2023).

This is reinforced by evidence showing that the performance gains observed between 2022 and 2025 aligned with the implementation of trauma-informed and culturally responsive/sustaining frameworks, including the Berry Street Education Model (Victoria State Government, 2024) and the Tri-Menu Model for Cultural Wellbeing (Louise, 2023). Together, these initiatives illustrate how relational, culturally grounded pedagogies can produce measurable improvements in refugee students' academic engagement and achievement.

Odhiambo (2025) reinforces that pedagogical change must be supported by structural and cultural alignment. Teachers thrive in inclusive practice when leadership fosters trust, collaboration, and ongoing professional dialogue around cultural responsiveness. Inclusion cannot depend solely on teacher goodwill; it requires institutional commitment and well-resourced environments that enable educators to embed culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Drawing on Louise (2023), flexible and culturally responsive curriculum models should accommodate diverse learning pathways that prioritize cultural wellbeing. Similarly, Harwood et al. (2024) demonstrate that recognizing embodied cultural expression—through sport, performance, or creative collaboration—can validate identity and strengthen belonging. Pedagogical approaches should therefore integrate narrative inquiry, arts-based learning, and dialogical methods to counter deindividualization and foster mutual respect.

6.2 Policy Recommendations: From Equity Compliance to Transformative Inclusion

At the systemic level, inclusion policies must evolve from compliance-oriented frameworks—where success is equated with access—to transformative models that address structural and epistemic inequities (Matthews, 2021; Reid & Mourad, 2024). Policymakers should incorporate relational indicators—such as belonging, agency, and cultural wellbeing—into evaluation and accountability frameworks.

Sustainable inclusion requires investment in whole-school approaches that integrate leadership development, arts-based practice, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Baak et al., 2023; Burke & Field, 2023; Tippett et al., 2024). Crucially, refugee students and families should be engaged in co-design educational initiatives, ensuring that lived experiences inform systemic reform and that inclusion becomes both participatory and culturally grounded (Louise, 2023).

6.3 Directions for Teacher Professional Learning

Teacher learning remains the linchpin of transformative inclusion. Studies emphasize the importance of critical reflexivity and intercultural competence in challenging internalized bias and systemic othering (Miller et al., 2022; Ramos, 2021). Professional learning should integrate Freirean (1970) critical pedagogy and Mezirow's (1997, 2018) transformative learning to cultivate awareness of power, privilege, and empathy in teaching practice.

Periods of improved student performance correspond with stronger teacher engagement in trauma-informed and relational practices. Wilkinson and Kaukko (2020) and Burke and Field (2023) demonstrate that collaborative, arts-based communities of practice—where teachers and refugee learners co-create knowledge—foster sustained attitudinal and pedagogical change. Professional learning should therefore be reframed not as technical upskilling but as an ethical and transformative process that reorients teaching toward justice, care, and co-learning.

7. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

The synthesis of recent scholarship (2020–2025) reveals that refugee inclusion in Australian secondary education remains both aspirational and uneven. While policy rhetoric increasingly foregrounds equity, belonging, and wellbeing, school-level realities continue to reproduce bureaucratic, deficit-oriented models that limit authentic participation. Yet across diverse contexts, a paradigm shift is emerging—from teaching refugees to learning with refugees.

Studies on embodied identity (Harwood et al., 2024), creative collaboration (Burke & Field, 2023), and adaptive curriculum design (Louise, 2023) demonstrate that inclusion thrives when education is relational, participatory, and humanizing. These approaches reposition teachers and students as co-learners, fostering empathy, cultural recognition, and mutual transformation.

Refugee students' academic performance (2020 -2025) shows measurable gains during periods aligned with relational, trauma-informed, and culturally inclusive frameworks, including the Berry Street Education Model (Victoria State Government, 2024) and Tri-Menu Model for Cultural Wellbeing (Louise, 2023). These patterns provide empirical grounding for the argument that inclusion succeeds when systemic structures align with humanising pedagogical practice.

Nevertheless, gaps persist. Current research is dominated by small-scale qualitative studies that, while insightful, constrain theoretical synthesis and systemic scalability. The absence of longitudinal, comparative, and participatory methodologies limits understanding of how relational inclusion can be sustained and scaled across educational systems. Additionally, the limited inclusion of refugee community voices, early-years contexts, and regional schooling environments highlights the need for more inclusive inquiry.

Future studies should adopt multi-level and mixed-method designs bridging classroom practice with policy analysis, capturing how inclusion evolves across contexts and over time. Participatory research, co-designed with refugee students, families, and educators, can generate ethically grounded insights into belonging and learning. Further exploration is also needed to institutionalize creative, embodied, and culturally sustaining pedagogies within teacher education and leadership frameworks.

In sum, genuine inclusion demands more than equitable access—it requires a systemic and ethical reimagining of education itself. When educators, leaders, and policymakers embrace relational and transformative principles, schools can become spaces of co-creation where refugee learners are not merely integrated but affirmed as active, valued contributors to Australia's educational and cultural renewal.

Funding

None.

Informed Consent

Obtained.

Provenance and Peer Review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

References

Abkhezr, P., McMahon, M., & Rossouw, P. (2015). Youth with refugee backgrounds in Australia: Contextual and practical considerations for career counsellors. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, *24*(2), 71-80. https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416215584406

Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2021). *Building a New Life in Australia: The longitudinal study of humanitarian migrants*. https://aifs.gov.au/projects/building-new-life-australia. https://aifs.gov.au/projects/building-new-life-australia

Baak, M. (2019). Racism and othering for South Sudanese heritage students in Australian schools: Is inclusion possible? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 23*(2), 125-141. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1426052.

Baak, M., Tippett, N., Johnson, B., Brown, J., & Sullivan, A. (2021). *Refugee education in Australian secondary schools: An overview of current practices*. University of South Australia. Retrieved from https://find.library.unisa.edu.au/discovery/fulldisplay/alma9916280310201831/61USOUTHAUS_INST:ROR

Baak, M., McDonald, S., Johnson, B., & Sullivan, A. (2023). Why school context matters in refugee education. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice, 22*(2), 283-299. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-023-09338-3.

Baak, M., Miller, E., Johnson, B., & Sullivan, A. (2023). Structure and agency in the development of education policies for refugee-background students. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 50*(2), 561-579. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00499-9

Bajaj, M., & Bartlett, L. (2017). Critical transnational curriculum for immigrant and refugee students. *Curriculum Inquiry, 47*(1), 25. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2016.1254498.

Block, K., Cross, S., Riggs, E., & Gibbs, L. (2014). Supporting schools to create an inclusive environment for refugee students. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18*(12), 1337-1355. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.899636.

Burke, R., & Field, R. S. (2023). Arts-based approaches to languages education with refugee-background learners in the early years: *Co-creating spaces of hope. Education Sciences, 13*(1), 85. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13010085

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.

García, O., & Sylvan, C. E. (2011). Pedagogies and practices in multilingual classrooms: Singularities in pluralities. *The Modern Language Journal, 95*(3), 385-400. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2011.01208.x.

Harwood, G., Heesch, K. C., Sendall, M. C., & Brough, M. (2024). The Basketball Boys: Young men from refugee backgrounds and the symbolic value of swagger in an Australian state high school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 28*(5), 475-490. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1941317.

Hemon, A. (2014). *The book of my lives*. Macmillan.

Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. MIT Press. ISBN: 0745618383.

Kaukko, M., Wilkinson, J., & Kohli, R. K. (2022). Pedagogical love in Finland and Australia: A study of refugee children and their teachers. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 30*(5), 731-747. DOI: 10.1080/14681366.2020.1740740.

Keddie, A. (2012). Pursuing justice for refugee students: Addressing issues of cultural (mis)recognition. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16*(12), 1295-1310. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.560687.

Kole, J. K. (2025). *Trauma-Informed Teaching and Refugee Student Engagement*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5798030

Louise, K. (2023). A tri-menu model of learning to support young refugees' cultural wellbeing in Australia. In S. S. Singh, O. Jovanovic, & M. Proyer (Eds.), *Perspectives on transitions in refugee education.* https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv32bm1gz.10.

Macaulay, L. (2023). "She just saw me—She didn't teach me": The perspectives of Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese youth on the student- teacher relationship in Australian schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 50*(5), 1323-1341. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00554-z.

Matthews, J. (2008). Schooling and settlement: Refugee education in Australia. *International Studies in Sociology of Education, 18*(1), 31- 45. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210802195947.

Matthews, J. (2021). Maligned mobilities, absences and emergencies: Refugee education in Australia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 25*(6), 720-734. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1569168

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 74*, 5-12. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401.

Mezirow, J. (2018). Transformative learning theory. In *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 114-128). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315147277-8.

Miller, E., Ziaian, T., de Anstiss, H., & Baak, M. (2022). Practices for inclusion, structures of marginalisation: Experiences of refugee background students in Australian secondary schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 49*(3), 613- 633. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00475-3

Miller, E., Ziaian, T., Baak, M., & de Anstiss, H. (2024). Recognition of refugee students' cultural wealth and social capital in resettlement. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 28*(5), 611-628. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946723

Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network. (Australia).(2019). *National education roundtable-Briefing paper.* MYAN. https://myan.org.au › documents › national-education-r

Naidoo, L., Wilkinson, J., Adoniou, M., & Langat, K. (2018). *Refugee background students transitioning Into higher education: Navigating complex spaces*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0420-0

New South Wales Department of Education. (2024, June). *New Arrivals Program*. NSW DET. https://education.nsw.gov.au › multicultural-education.

New South Wales Department of Education and Training. (2025, May). *Intensive English centres*. NSW DET. https://education.nsw.gov.au › new-arrivals-program.

Odhiambo, G. (2025). Creating a supporting environment in schools for students with refugee backgrounds in Australia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2025.2467633.

Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., ... & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71.

Ramos, F. (2021). Academic success as wilful resistance: Theorising with refugee-background students in Australia. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 42*(3), 440-455. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2020.1718063.

Reid, C., & Mourad, Z. (2024). 'There seems to be some disparity then between our Syrian and Iraqi refugee children who seemed to have everything': Constructing 'good refugees' and the

ensuing equity issues in Australian schools. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 37*(2), 376-391. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae016

Sutton, D., Kearney, A., & Ashton, K. (2023). Improving educational inclusion for refugee-background learners through appreciation of diversity. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 27*(6), 671-688. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1867377.

Taylor, S., & Sidhu, R. K. (2012). Supporting refugee students in schools: What constitutes inclusive education? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16*(1), 39-56. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110903560085.

Tippett, N., Baak, M., Johnson, B., & Sullivan, A. (2024). What is "fair" and "just" in refugee education? How teachers and school leaders negotiate competing discourses of "equity" and "equality" in Australia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 28*(14), 3454-3469. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2208116

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019a). *Refugee education 2030: A strategy for refugee inclusion*. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org › sites › files › legacy-pdf

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2019b). *Stepping up: Refugee education in crisis*. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025a). *What is a refugee?* UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org › what-refugee

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025b). *Global trends*. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends

Victoria Department of Education & Training. (2025, June). *Supporting students from refugee backgrounds*. VIC DET. https://www.schools.vic.gov.au/supporting-students-re

Victoria State Government. (2024, November). *Trauma-informed practice (Berry Street Education Model)*. Victoria State Government. https://www.vic.gov.au/trauma-informed-practice-berry

Vilanova, F., Beria, F. M., Costa, Â. B., & Koller, S. H. (2017). Deindividuation: From Le Bon to the social identity model of deindividuation effects. *Cogent Psychology, 4*(1), 1308104. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2017.1308104

Wilkinson, J., & Kaukko, M. (2020). Educational leading as pedagogical love: The case for refugee education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 23*(1), 70-85. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1629492

Zimbardo, P. G. (1969). The human choice: Individuation, reason, and order versus deindividuation, impulse, and chaos. In *Nebraska symposium on motivation*. University of Nebraska Press.

Ccopyright Disclaimer