

Principal attacks treatment of asylum-seeking children

A school principal honoured with the 2014 Australian Human Rights Medal has accused the Federal Government of placing cruel limitations on child asylum seekers and of a "monumental passing of the buck" by offloading would-be refugees to other countries.

For the past 19 years, Dorothy Hoddinott (pictured) has been the principal of Holroyd High in western Sydney, where she has guided hundreds of refugee and asylum-seeking children to become model citizens, many of them having arrived on boats before Labor and Coalition governments

closed that door. On Wednesday night, the Human Rights Commission honoured Ms Hoddinott by awarding her the medal at a ceremony at the Museum of Contemporary Art, where federal Attorney-General George Brandis was a guest speaker.

She said the treatment of children in immigration detention and their lack of schooling breached not only international law but the state's child protection legislation, as did the denial of some rights to asylum-seeking children in the community. ▶▶▶ **Comment, Page 20**



The western Sydney school where there are no rules other than trust and hope

I am a teacher. For the greater part of my career, I have taught in schools on the other side of the tracks, working with disadvantaged students, particularly students from immigrant and refugee communities.

I have learnt a lot on my almost 50-year journey in teaching: that birth, social class, wealth, ethnicity and gender should not define or limit your future; that all children can learn; that all children, regardless of their background and family circumstances, deserve a sound education that respects them and provides them with the firm foundation they need for the rest of their lives as active participants in society.

I have had the privilege to be the principal of Holroyd High School since 1995. Holroyd is a western Sydney school where most students are of recent non-English speaking background, where all the students in the Intensive English Centre have been in

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circumstance has put them, but that is not where they need remain.

Seeing formerly disempowered and illiterate students enjoy success in their schooling inspires me to continue my work in education. I am awed by Faduma from Somalia, who has just finished her HSC, and who hopes to go to university next year. She could not read or write four years ago. There is Bashir from Afghanistan, our vice-captain in 2014, who was orphaned when he was 12 and came to us from detention in Darwin. Bashir was illiterate but taught himself to read and write. He has been to the United Nations in Geneva to talk about the plight of child refugees. Bashir hopes to become an accountant.

There is Sokaina, who has recently graduated in nursing, the first person in her family to go to school and the first to go to university. Sokaina is now specialising in midwifery and thinking of studying medicine. There is Ali, who completed his HSC and a Bachelor

Dorothy Hoddinott



Australia less than a year and almost a third of students in years 7 to 12 less than three years. Almost 60 per cent of our students are of recent refugee background, many with interrupted or no schooling before they come to us, and most with experience of trauma that would be unimaginable in the mainstream Australian community.

We have children in the school who have seen their parents murdered; we have children who have been raped; we have children who have been forced to live in poverty and fear in refugee camps; we have children who have fled for their lives and have come by boat to Australia, seeking safety, and have instead been locked up in detention centres, watching the

adult world around them disintegrate into despair and madness.

About a sixth of all students currently enrolled in the school are young asylum seekers. For most of these students, the future is problematic, given the government's harsh asylum seeker policies.

Our first task at Holroyd High as teachers is to normalise lives – coming to school on time, wearing a new uniform, having books and pens and pencils, learning to speak English and sometimes to read and write. You can't make lives normal again unless you really care about those lives and respect what they have endured and what they can achieve.

The core values of respect and responsibility are deeply embedded in everything that happens in the school. We have worked around respect and responsibility since 1996, after I abolished the school rules and negotiated a new way of doing business. The school rebuilds the capacity for trust in young

people who have lost that capacity as a result of damaging personal experience, and in rebuilding trust, which is at the heart of a civil society, we begin to rebuild hope for the future. Where there is hope, there is a space for aspirations and for learning. The learning programs in the school are highly focused and strategic, as they must be to get our students over the line.

English language learning is critical to our success, as is a focus on literacy and numeracy, not just the basics but to a high level. We expect a lot of our students and we demand a lot of our teachers. That pays off: progression rates for our students are significantly above state and national averages, which translate in year 12 into sound HSC results and a higher than average university enrolment – about 40 per cent of our HSC students, compared with just over 30 per cent for all Australian students and 15 per cent for low SES students. Most of the students at Holroyd are low SES. That is where

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or of Arts while working at night and has now completed a Master of Laws and is looking to a diplomatic career.

And there is Zainab Kaabi, who spent a year in Woomera Detention Centre. She spent three terms in our IEC, came into year 11 and was equal third in her year by the end of the year. Zainab was on a temporary protection visa. Early in year 12, she told me that Centrelink had told her she had to leave school, as she had turned 18 and could not continue her schooling. I would not let her leave school, so set up a donor trust fund to support her to finish her HSC.

The following year, I established a

trust fund through the National Foundation for Australian Women to support refugee girls at the school.

The two funds supported Zainab through university as well. Zainab now has degrees in medical sciences and pharmacy, is an Australian citizen and is married, with twin daughters.

The fund I started in Zainab's name now operates through the Public Education Foundation and has awarded 46 scholarships over the past three years to young refugees in NSW, ACT and Victoria.

The fund will support another 54 students in 2015. These are the very sorts of people Australia wants: hard-working, motivated, resilient, some of the most enterprising people we are likely to see. If you go back a couple of generations, you have the Frank Lowys, who also came as refugees with little education. Think of how they have enriched society. I have no doubt these young people will do so as well.

More than anything, I remain ener-

gised by the continuing need to advocate for young refugees. The past and present treatment of children in immigration detention, and the cruel limitations placed on young asylum seekers in the community are in breach of common decency and of the law, both in terms of our international obligations and of domestic law aimed at the protection of children.

The vulnerability of these children, and by extension, the vulnerability of their families continues to be a major issue. It will not go away by depriving asylum seekers of their rights. I believe our treatment of asylum seekers is one of the great moral issues of our time and that our continuing denial of basic human rights to asylum seekers diminishes us as Australians and casts doubt on our democratic institutions.

Dorothy Hoddinott, principal of Holroyd High School, is the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2014 Human Rights Medallist.