

National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention

Sydney Public Hearing

Friday, 4 April 2014

President I wonder if I could now call Dorothy Hoddinott who is the Principal of the Holroyd High School that we have just been hearing about from our earlier witness Bashir Yousufi. So thank you very much Ms Hoddinott. We finished hearing from the Refugee Council with a comment that of course when the children get to schools they can often bounce back and move on. I wonder would you like to give us an opening statement and perhaps tell us a little bit about your role as Principal at the Holroyd High School.

Ms Hoddinott Okay. I am the Principal of Holroyd High School, I have been Principal there for 18 years. It is a school which has both a high school part of it and an intensive English centre where young people of non-English speaking background newly arrived in the country come to study English for a year and prepare themselves for school and for life in Australia. The school has about 220 children currently in the intensive English centre, all of whom have been in Australia less than five terms, so less than a year, and in the high school, 83% of the students are of non-English speaking background: 37% of those have been in Australia less than three years and 67% less than seven years. 62% of all the students in the school are of refugee background. I currently have 80 children across the school who are either in community detention or on 050 bridging visas. There are a further 23 who are on 866 visas and they are obviously protection visas and so they are safe from what might happen to the others. There is a very substantial number of young people in community detention living separate from their families and living in a state of suspension, not knowing what the future will hold for them.

The school, despite that, has a long history of (a) dealing with refugees, including a dozen years ago dealing with people on temporary protection visas and bridging visas and we have had a lot of success in helping those children adjust to life in Australia and to go on to university. We average about 40% tertiary uptake in the school from all sections of the school. Most of the school population is poor and I spend probably about between twenty-five and forty thousand dollars a year on basic support for people, including things like shoes, clothes, books and excursions, subject fees, calculators, you know, you name it. Sometimes... last year we paid the bond on accommodation for a refugee boy who'd become homeless and was living in his car and we paid the first four weeks of his rent so that we could get him into proper accommodation. There are quite a few of our students living alone and

people like Bashir, of course, live independently. We keep an eye on them. We have a raft of programs to make the transition of young people of refugee background into the school a better one than it might be. By and large most of our students complete high school and as far as we can trace them, about 70% of last year's HSC class are in some form of further education this year. I guess there's something else I should say, previously when we had children on temporary protection visas, the rule was that when they turned 18, if they remained in full time education, they were no longer eligible for the special benefit. I established a trust fund in the school accounts which I called after the girl whose situation made us aware of what was happening, "Friends of Zainab", and we've used that to support a large number of young people. Currently it's helping support about fifteen young people at university, young people of refugee background, and three years ago I migrated the fund officially to the Public Education Foundation where each year it's starting to help significant numbers of young refugees with the last two years of schooling and with tertiary education. Unfortunately the rules of scholarships mean that we can't support through the Public Education Foundation young people who are in community detention or on bridging visas.

President You are prohibited from doing so?

Ms Hoddinott Yes.

President That concludes your...

Ms Hoddinott I don't know what else you would like me to say in my statement. There are question I'd like to answer too.

President I'll ask you some questions if I may and I'm very happy to answer any questions you have for us. As you know, the thrust of this inquiry is about the impact of closed detention on children. So it does have a very particular focus and one of the reasons we were particularly interested in talking to you was that you see, obviously, a very high number of children who've just emerged from closed detention before they come to your school and as you say, some live very much on their own, presumably others in community groups. Can you initially tell us what is your impression of these children when they first join you at Holroyd High School?

Ms Hoddinott There are two groups. There are the unaccompanied minors and there are the children who are in whatever remnants of their family are left after their journey. A slightly different effect for both of them, but I guess when they arrive they have, generally, a generalisation, I mean it doesn't happen to everybody, but in general because they've been for usually quite prolonged periods in detention, there's quite a lot of difficulty in adjusting to life in the community. Children have great difficulty with

being incarcerated, particularly if they've committed no crime and the restrictions and the institutionalisation that happens in the detention centres make them quite generally passive, depressed, slow to react when they come out of detention. What we notice is that a lot of them have difficulty with concentration, with focussing on their school work, no matter how keen they are to get back into it and with memory. Some of the students actually have memory loss. They're not recalling things which they should recall. Quite a few of our students also of course are illiterate when they arrive, or only semi-literate. A lot of the students from places like Afghanistan have had very little, if any, education and so there's quite a series of tall orders initially for those students: they have to learn English; they have to learn the sort of English that enables them to manage education and schooling; they have to learn basic literacy and numeracy and in some cases that involves the things that you would expect five year olds to do in our community - learning how to hold a pen, learning how to sit at a desk for six hours a day and so on. They have to cope with the after effects of what their experiences have taken them through, both the push that made them leave wherever they were, the loss of family members, often the loneliness. Bashir was fourteen when he fled Afghanistan. I can't imagine what it's like to be a fourteen year old child making your way right across the world, surrounded always by strangers and not sure of the motives of those people. Children usually having trusting relationships with adults if they're in a stable situation. There's no trust, so one of the first things that goes for immigrants, for children, for refugee children and particularly those in detention, is trust. A lack of trust in authority, a lack of trust in institutions, a lack of trust in the future and lack of faith for the future and hopelessness and so on. The school actually has to start right at the beginning in rebuilding trust and has to act with complete integrity, absolute integrity, in its relationships with these very fragile groups of people. And then of course, part of our role is to give people hope for the future and that's very, very difficult to do if young people have no sense of what's going to happen to them in the future. They've got no sense of whether they'll be allowed to stay in Australia, whether they'll be allowed to complete their education, whether they will be allowed to re-join any family members who are left. Whether they will ever be able to be citizens of any country. So that's a fairly tall order for school. The effects of both the refugee experience and of detention on families are quite profound. I think it disempowers parents from their role in parenting. It removes the capacity to deal with every day decisions, which is one of the ways that children establish their view of the world and relationships, and suddenly their parents are completely powerless and unable to make real decisions, and the children perceive them as powerless. One of the things that happens in some of these families is quite a lot of tension between children and parents. And adolescents of course are sort of programmed into a bit of breaking loose and that can be really quite bad. I'm dealing right now with a mother and daughter. The daughter is quite

profoundly disabled. I have to say the Department of Education has miraculously provided her with a full time teacher's aide and wheelchair and complete support, and we're doing the same. But the mother clearly is not coping. The danger there is if the mother can't cope, then she may be put back into detention and the daughter left in the community or they may both go back into detention and so that's an inhibiting factor for us in dealing effectively with the difficulties in that very small family. That's a child who desperately wants to be in school. Her whole life is the school. She wept when we had to wait for her authority to enrol because it was going to be a couple days and so I moved heaven and earth to get that and she's very excited by school. But we must deal with the other matter and because community detention isn't like living a real life, your privacy is invaded by external judgments about how you behave. So any infringement of those can be seen as the sort of factor in sending you back into detention, perhaps expelling you to somewhere like Nauru.

President That threat remains.

Ms Hoddinott That threat remains when people are in detention... in community detention. So there are a number of issues. I suppose there's obviously going to be an impact on mainly boys who are sole flyers in that they don't have family back up. They don't have the people to whom they can refer the normal questions of adolescence. You know, what do I do here? How do I talk to this person? Whatever it is, there's no one to debrief on and there's a sort of an accumulation of disengagement which is very serious. We work very hard to try and keep our students engaged but for some students it's actually really hard to get out of bed in the morning because they're in a situation of such total hopelessness at a time of their lives when most young people are actually looking to the future and making plans for the rest of their lives. There's a further issue in that until just a few weeks ago when young people in community detention turned eighteen, they were removed from school. I made a complaint to HREOC about that last year and it's my understanding that now we can continue to enrol them but it's unsupported and of course the young people concerned are no longer living in supervised accommodation. They are faring for themselves and I think there are real issues there. Being seventeen one day and being eighteen the next doesn't mean that you are fully adult or that you don't need support and care from the adult world.

President And this of course can happen at any time during that school year.

Ms Hoddinott Yeah, yeah. Of course another thing is that, it's not happening so much at the moment but it does happen, DIAC will simply swoop in and remove a whole lot of people and send them off to a hostel in Queensland or something, overnight. They don't have a chance to say goodbye to the people that they have befriended in the

school, and for children who are alone in the world the friendships that they make at school and the friendships that they make with their teachers are the principal relationships in their lives and when they're removed without warning to another State or another part of Australia and into a completely new situation, it's a further sort of disarrangement of their lives.

President So these will be children who are living in community detention, they're attending school and then they can be suddenly transferred to another community detention environment.

Ms Hoddinott Yes, yes, or in some cases I understand, back into closed detention. But they've all been through closed detention. 103 young people currently in my school, it's quite a large proportion of the school, there's 530 students. That 103 young people have all been in closed detention. They've all experienced that. I'm sure... I'm convinced from working for many years now with young people who had the experience of detention centre incarceration that it has an emotional and a social impact on them that will remain for a long time and children build relationships in these crucial years and these relationships are being undermined and destroyed by our system.

President So you describe that these damaged children arriving in your school can you tell us what happens over the one, two, three, four years that follow about their capacity for progress and improvement and hopefully some resolution of their legal position?

Ms Hoddinott We work actively to subvert the dominant paradigm, as we used to say when I was a student, and so we have a highly effective program both of educational support and of psychological support in the Intensive Centre which is where most young people arrive, although some of them have come to us from other centres or from interstate and come directly into the high school. We work very closely with STARTTS and over the years that sort of relationship with STARTTS means that STARTTS' counsellors come into the school to work with those students in the school. Adolescents can get lost between school and an appointment, I have to say. If you nab them at school then they don't get lost, we know where they are. But we work very closely with STARTTS. We have 1.8 counsellor positions permanently in the Intensive Centre so, for example, today there when I spoke to the counsellors there were two there at the centre and we have part of a counsellor in the high school. We were very conscious a number of years ago that there were significant numbers of older boys particularly, who were, whose literacy and numeracy levels were, even after a year of intense work, were still below what you would say would be a TAFE benchmark and so going into TAFE wasn't appropriate for them because they didn't, they couldn't maintain their progress and they also got lost. So we established an alternative vocational HSC pathway in the school and we ran that back into the

Intensive Centre and we actually do work studies and so on in the Intensive Centre with those students that we know are unlikely to achieve high academic results. The aim is really to make sure that every student, particularly these students who come through the school leave school with a Higher School Certificate. That credential doesn't have to be an academic credential but for these vocational students we run a number of what are call the vocational educational training frameworks in the high school and so it's our intention to build competencies in various trade areas for these students so that when they leave school they will have two pieces of paper. They will have a Higher School Certificate, which is an important credential that can't, of course, be removed from anybody, and a TAFE up to Certificate II, a qualification which can then give them some sort of priority and entry into TAFE. A significant number, however, do adjust to school work very well and it is not uncommon for us to have students sit the HSC and be successful in getting to university within three years of starting to learn English and in some cases within three years of learning to read and write. So schools can work very, very hard on those programs. In the high school we have a transition program, we have two transition programs, and the school employs out of its own funds (marginally picking them from little bits and pieces) someone who works with students who are at risk, in moving them into completion of the certificates and getting into appropriate work and we also have a refugee transition program which runs from year 9 to year 12 and which picks up on young refugees and so we have four days a week of that program - effectively five because other people toss in. We run a large program of English language and literacy support and numeracy support, and a very extensive welfare program where everything is sort of meshed and linked so that we've got natural overlap in it. We also have an alignment with three Sydney universities for disadvantaged programs with them, and the Australian Business Community Network, which enables us to mentor students. We don't make a differentiation between a child who's on a temporary visa or is in community detention or a permanent resident or an Australian citizen in allocating children into these programs, so it is what is appropriate for this child, how can we tailor the whole curriculum to the needs of this child, how can we work really hard to make sure that when they leave they will have learnt all the things which they need to get by, and so I think it's a fairly effective program and its personalised, it's individualised.

President That is what you call something that doesn't appear to be happening within the Department when they are detained. We are seeing a blanket rules and policies applying that all.

Ms Hoddinott Every school really makes its own determination on how they deal with these students and you can decide that it's not within your terms of reference, I guess, or your scope, to pay the bond on a student's rental or not. But we have made a

commitment into what we understand to be a very fragile community there and it's our job to educate them, it's our job to rebuild trust in at least some of the institutions in this country and it's our job also to give them some hope for the future, but to give them the means to negotiate the future, which is what education does.

President And what kind of integration do you see from detained children who've joined your school with the other Australian children? Do you find them making friends, visiting each other's houses and seeing what a normally supported Australian family look like?

Ms Hoddinott Yes, absolutely and I am sure that Bashir would back me up in this, but there's the friendship groups go right across the board in the school and the school doesn't make any distinction. We do say to students we are fiercely anti-racist, we have a lot of refugee students, this is very important to us and so on, but there's actually very little incidence of racism. Most of the racism that we experience comes from outside and the students adjust. I think that right at the core of that is that they trust the school and they trust what the school is doing for them and so I suppose the school, the school becomes like the family for many of our students, and so the students live within that understanding. They know that the school is there for their interests, not for the interests of any power group outside at all. I am quite fierce when faced with Serco guards and things like that.

President Well that does create what we are reporting as an environment of surveillance and harassment by the guards.

Ms Hoddinott Yes, when, of course, when we are taking children out of detention centres and we do that from time to time, we become their de facto detention centre. It's the only one in Australia with an open gate. But we also become designated persons. I've never found any teacher who is not prepared to volunteer to do that. We did have a very bitter battle over a couple of boys a few years ago who didn't receive procedural fairness in the way they were treated by the Department of Immigration and we fought very hard for those boys. When they were put back into detention, which was a prison-like environment, we visited them, teachers went after school to work through homework with them and things like that. Initially we had to do it one on one because we weren't allowed to sit with the two boys and one teacher, for example. But I insisted that they come back to school and the detention centre sent a large vehicle with five guards for two boys. So we had to change that because that's absurd. I think it's that sort of overkill thing that the way that detention centres operate isn't sympathetic to the needs of children at all and it certainly shows the monumental lack of understanding of the way schools operate and the demands of school and so on.

President The story about the guards certainly meshes with the words of children who spoke to us about how embarrassing it was that if they went on a school outing for example the Departmental officials or the Serco officers would be sent along and how embarrassing all this was. In the end they wouldn't do it.

Ms Hoddinott I won't let them. I don't let them. I say, "You're not the principal of this school, you won't tell me how to run the school. There will be Mr So and So who is the designated person on this excursion and we will depart at this time and return more or less at this time. You can come and pick them up from the school from the school car park. I will not allow any firearms on the school premises and I will not allow more than two people at a time and so on then if you get in my way, I will invoke the Inclosed Public Lands Act against you and expel you from school grounds. You have to be fairly bloody minded about dealing with these things, because in the end my interests are the welfare and wellbeing of the students, and not the welfare and wellbeing of guards from a detention centre or people from a government department.

President Well we are certainly getting a lot of evidence that there's an overcautious approach by departmental officials or guards so they're in this environment of fear and surveillance that seems to be completely disproportionate to any conceivable threat that these children could have either to others or themselves and what you're saying is confirming that.

Ms Hoddinott We've had quite a few children from Villawood, I'm prepared to take any children at any time that I'm asked. The front gate of the school is open all the time, which I suppose gives our truants a chance to remove themselves across the canal to have a quick smoke. But no child in immigration detention, no child who is with us during a school day from closed detention, has ever put a foot outside that gate except with permission. So they operate, we operate the schools on trust, we don't operate on coercion. Schools are not places where we have armed guards and there is no need for an armed guard to accompany children on a school excursion. The teacher has a clearly defined legal duty of care in that regard and very few schools ever lose a child. Principals would be quite cranky about that.

President Can I ask a question that may be beyond what you would like to speak about but you have so much experience in the education of children that I'm just wondering about your view when I ask the departmental officials why they are not able to provide proper educational facilities on Christmas Island, I get the answer that it's difficult to do there are impediments. We appreciate that it's an island a long way from the coast of Western Australian but as an experienced professional in managing in an institution that runs education programs for detained children, why does this appear

to be so extremely difficult to offer some form of curriculum based education?

Ms Hoddinott I think they're not interested. When we last talked to HREOC in your last inquiry there was no educational provision at all for children in detention centres. What there is is often inadequate. Christmas Island has a central school, there's no reason why an agreement couldn't be reached with the Western Australia Department of Education to increase the staffing of that school and to put in a demountable or two and to have the children come to school. I think it's important that they come out of the detention centre to school. Everything about life inside the detention centre is distorted, it's not normal for children to live behind razor wire. It's not normal for children to see people try and kill themselves. It's not normal for children to be locked up for hours each day, as sometimes happens. It's really and always that sense of being surrounded by a fence and not being able to do things spontaneously as children like to do.

So I think it's really important that children not be schooled inside the centres. I think that it's important that the... provision to move them into local schools where they can interact with other kids and where they can do things that other kids do, you know, run around and insult each other and have a good time and go to class and do their homework and do stuff in school. Children need to play and children need the space to play and they need to be with other children and they need to have some sense of normalcy. For those children who've come to us on a daily basis out of detention centre, the high point of their lives for five days a week has been coming to school. The weekends have been endless and painful and boring and the holidays even worse, so what we've sought to do is to find ways to take them on daily excursions during those periods of time. Schools can broker that. Children who arrive in school from detention centres are often quite subdued when they arrive. You can tell when life is starting to get normal when they start to test the boundaries and when they start to do the naughty things that ordinary students will do and so on. That's a good sense, that's a sign that a sort of normal life is starting. But they still go home and I heard the last speaker talk about the poverty of the home, that's another issue. That's one reason why we put so much money into making sure that all the basic needs for schooling are met so that no child looks different, they're not in rags or in second hand me downs or dirty or anything of that kind. They're, they're all properly dressed and they don't look any different from other kids.

If I have a visitor to the school and walk into the playground and say, "OK, six out of ten of every child you see, six out of ten are refugees, you tell me which ones are the refugees?" And of course, no one can tell, because, because they are just high school aged students doing the things that those students do. It's very important to make life normal.

President Ok well that really has been extremely helpful evidence and I'm myself rather surprised by the high number of unaccompanied minors that you have and we would be very grateful if you could follow up with some statistics just to confirm the particular nature of your own school but I think your evidence is really inspiring to the rest of us and just shows what a good educational institution can actually achieve for these very damaged children.

Ms Hoddinott Schools are right at the heart of democracy and they are right at the heart of people living successful lives and if schools don't rise to that occasion then they are doing the wrong thing.

President Certainly have, thank you very much indeed.

Ms Hoddinott Thank you.