

Whose Policy, Whose Voice? Centering Refugee-Background Youth in Education Transformation and Policy-Making

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Abstract

This paper examines how young people from African refugee backgrounds can meaningfully participate in educational policy-making processes through critical engaging participatory action research (CEPAR). Conducted in a secondary school in Melbourne, Australia, the study positions students not as policy recipients but as critical contributors whose lived experiences inform system-level change. The research responds to a significant gap in refugee education and policy literature, where student engagement is often depoliticised and disconnected from policy development. The study explored the structural, relational, and institutional factors shaping students' engagement in schooling. A socially just research praxis was co-designed with students, drawing on critical and dialogic pedagogies that foregrounded power, voice, and collective agency. Data were generated through activity-based focus groups and student-produced artefacts within communicative spaces involving 21 participants aged 13–17. These spaces enabled the articulation of exclusionary practices embedded within everyday school policies and routines, as well as the emergence of resistant practices through which students re-imagined more equitable policy possibilities. The findings demonstrate how policy-making can be informed by young people's experiential knowledge, challenging deficit framings and tokenistic consultation. The paper argues for refugee education policy processes that are co-constructed with young people and grounded in participatory, relational, and justice-oriented approaches.

