



A Uniform Decision: Community and Commemoration in Public School

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This case study takes place at a fictional Australian school receiving a high concentration of students with refugee backgrounds. Students with refugee backgrounds in New South Wales schools make up about 1.4% of the student population. Arriving in Australia mainly from war-ravaged countries and often learning English as an Additional Language or dialect (EAL/D), they are usually allocated to a few schools situated in economically disadvantaged areas.¹ While the term “students with refugee backgrounds” refers to a range of students entering Australia on various visas and those born in transit countries or recently after their family’s arrival in Australia, many arrive directly from refugee camps having scant school-based experiences (Watkins, Noble and Wong 2018²). Schools hire additional EAL/D teachers, Arabic translators or refugee coordinators to liaise with families to support their acclimatisation to Australian culture. Students who are involved in both their home culture and their new culture experience greater sociocultural and psychological adaptation (Berry et al, 2006, p. 76). A significant aspect of Australian culture is the Anzac Spirit.³ Anzac Day is a public holiday honouring the April 25, 1915 battle of Gallipoli, Turkiye, when the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (the Anzacs) fought with the British Empire in World War I. During WW1 Australia lost 10 times more lives as a percentage of the population, than the United States. Historians dispute whether Australian nationhood was ‘born’ at Gallipoli⁴. Over 93% of Australians believe it should be commemorated each year⁵, with growing numbers attending dawn services around the country and expressing sympathy for military personnel’s sacrifices⁶. All public schools hold some version of Anzac Day service on site and it is compulsory learning in the Australian Curriculum (v8.4)⁷. In 2015, a report on the centenary celebrations of Anzac Day by the Department of Veteran Affairs considered multiculturalism to be a divisive risk to the holiday, but a later survey found minimal risk because culturally and linguistically diverse communities were “disengaged... and unlikely to participate” in Anzac day commemorations (Colman Brunton, 2011, cited by Drodzdzewski, 2016, p. 8)⁸.

¹ In some of the most economically disadvantaged areas of Sydney are found the highest numbers of refugees on bridging visas, eg. Merrylands, Fairfield, Bankstown and Granville (see: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/asylum-community/7/> and <https://maps.ncoss.org.au/>) with intensive english language centres nearby -

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/multicultural-education/english-as-an-additional-language-or-dialect/new-arrivals-program/intensive-english-centres>

² https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18530_its_complex_centenary_report_digital.pdf

³ “The Spirit of ANZAC is an intangible thing. It is unseen, unpredictable, an unquenchable thirst for justice, freedom and peace. However, despite being intangible, the Spirit of ANZAC is a cornerstone which underpins our Australian image, way of life and indeed is an integral part of our heritage.”

<https://anzacday.org.au/the-spirit-of-anzac>

⁴ Lake, M., Reynolds, H., McKenna, M., Damousi, J. (2010) What’s Wrong with Anzac: The militarisation of Australian History, NewSouth.

⁵ <https://www.news.com.au/national/anzac-day/survey-finds-93-per-cent-of-australians-believe-it-is-important-to-commemorate-anzac-day/news-story/e7564aa663bbe2adcdb2e876d1dbdc3c>

⁶ Australia’s military personnel have higher rates of PTSD than the wider community but are not adequately supported <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2019/04/24/1374433/returned-soldiers-and-ptsd> and <https://theconversation.com/veterans-have-poorer-mental-health-than-australians-overall-we-could-be-serving-them-better-119525>

⁷ Bedford, A. & Barnes, N., (2022) The truth: what our students really learn about Anzac Day, *EduResearch Matters*, AARE. <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=12645>

⁸ Colman Brunton, 2011. *Department of Veterans’ Affairs ‘A Centenary of Service’ Community Research Phase II*. Colman Brunton: Sydney

Department of Veterans’ Affairs. 2011. *How Australia may Commemorate the Anzac Centenary*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government Australia.

Robbie Jones kicked the floor with the toes of his runners, his small form gathered into the corner of the couch in Principal Greg Sefton's office. Greg watched the boy sympathetically—it wasn't easy coming back from a suspension. But after Robbie had hit a classmate on the playground, Greg had been left with little choice. Though Robbie had reported the classmate had first called him 'povo',⁹ the rules were clear when it came to fighting.

"I'm so glad you're back with us today, Robbie," Greg smiled. "I know it's going to be a good day."

"Yes, sir," Robbie muttered, his eyes on the floor.

Greg hoped that it would indeed be a good day. When dropping Robbie off, his mother had let Greg know how difficult having the boy at home had been. Robbie's parents were divorced. His mother was struggling to pay the rent on her single income, and taking time off to care for him hadn't helped her situation. Meanwhile, after the divorce Robbie's father had been in and out of shelters for two months. The playground fight earlier in the week was just one sign that Robbie was struggling with the upheaval in his home life.

"What's one thing you can do to help make this a good day, Robbie?" Greg asked gently.

"I can stay with my mates and stay away from bludgers,"¹⁰ Robbie said. "My dad's coming for Anzac, and I don't want to get in trouble again."

Greg nodded, but inwardly he flinched. He wasn't sure that Mr Jones actually would be coming to campus to celebrate Anzac Day, but Robbie didn't need to know that, especially not today.

"Best get to class," Greg said, standing and opening his door. "I'll come and check later to see how you're getting on."

Left alone, Greg sighed. It was now time to prepare for his next meeting with a Year Five boy—a boy facing struggles of his own.

During this school year, Burnsley Public school had seen a steady in-flow of refugee families. The past few months had been a whirlwind of finding and developing new programs to support the refugee children, while maintaining learning and behaviour support for struggling Australian-born students in this high poverty area—students like Robbie. Some of the changes Greg had made, like bringing on Mohammad Kahn to liaise and translate for Arabic families, had been an immediate success, with his caring affect and his knowledgeable linguistic and cultural translation. It was a coup having someone with Mohammad's background, an Afghan translator who risked everything to help the armed forces against the Taliban, end up in Burnsley repatriated under asylum.¹¹ This morning, Uncle Mo would join Greg to meet with Kawa and his father, Mr Al Ahmad, newly arrived from Syria.

Despite Uncle Mo's success, there was still a lot of work to do to develop a truly welcoming and safe school culture. Greg was uncertain how his staff might receive some of the more extensive suggestions he was considering, such as intensive professional retraining in trauma-informed pedagogies and

Drozdowski, D. (2016) Does Anzac sit comfortably within Australia's Multiculturalism?, *Thinking Space, Australian Geographer*, 47-1, 3-10.

⁹ A slang term for 'dirt poor'

¹⁰ A slang term for 'a lazy good-for-nothing'

¹¹ Newcastle received a number of Afghan interpreters into the community, but some of their family members left behind are still in danger.

<https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/7399776/afghans-left-behind-being-taken-or-killed/>

rearranging the school schedule to prioritise wellbeing over some curriculum reporting mandates. It was hard to know where to even begin.

And then there was Burnsley's Anzac Day commemoration. Since the 1970s, Burnsley had invited volunteers from the Returned and Services League (RSL) of Australia, led by a representative of the Defence Force. Current representative Lieutenant Parkes arrived in uniform to a school assembly where they flew the flag at half-mast and sounded the evocative lone bugle for the Last Post¹². This event was especially important, sacred even, as Burnsley was located in a community of veterans, with a long Honours Board¹³ in the school hall listing former students who went to war. But this year, Greg had been stalling on inviting the RSL members, including Robbie's ex-serviceman father. Greg was increasingly uncertain about exposing the refugee-background students, who had experienced so much trauma, to reminders of war¹⁴. Today he would raise the matter with the staff and make a decision about how to approach this important Australian holiday.

Opening the door to the Year Five classroom at his mid-morning break, Greg barely avoided colliding with a gaggle of students. "Whoa there you lot, get an early mark?"

"Miss Green said we could go to lunch early if we finished everything," said Robbie defensively.

"And you did finish everything, Robbie? Good job."

Robbie looked anxiously after the other boys - they had already started their wargame, playing soldiers amongst trees in the playground.

Greg nodded his head, "Go on then." Robbie raced out after his classmates.

Inside the classroom, Mrs Lynn Green sat at her desk tidying her notes. She pushed a wisp of greying hair back into place.

"Hi Lynn, just wanted to see how the new kids were settling in, where are the rest of them?"

"They're with Uncle Mo - just me and the Aussie kids for the past hour, doing actual lessons."

"They're all Aussie kids, Lynn," he chided gently.

"Well, some are still trying for Protection Visas," Lynn corrected him. "And you can't expect the new kids to follow much of what's going on. The special English class is helpful, but I worry they aren't understanding, so I focus on hands-on learning when they do join us. And when they're away I get to spend a lot more time with the others, like dear Robbie, and even if English is not their second language, they need the extra attention."

Greg nodded.

"Honestly," Lynn sighed. "In all my time teaching, I don't think I've ever had student learning differences so pronounced. Some of these new kids, like Kawa, had only bits and pieces at the refugee camp. He's so

¹² For example, this high socioeconomic public primary school in Westmead, an area in outer Sydney where more than 90% of students have a language background other than English.

<https://westmead-p.schools.nsw.gov.au/news/2019/4/anzac-ceremony.html>

¹³ See image and symbolism of school Honour rolls:

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/commemoration/symbols-commemoration/honour-rolls>

¹⁴ Imig, S., Sellars, M. & Fischetti, J. (2022) *Creating Spaces of Wellbeing and Belonging for Refugee and Asylum-Seeker Students: Skills and Strategies for School Leaders*. Routledge.

quiet! And that other group”—she motioned out the door—“they have a lot of energy. Though Robbie seems more withdrawn lately, even before the suspension. I thought he needed a new friend, so I paired him with Kawa this morning in science; I hoped it might help them both.”

Greg raised his eyebrows, encouragingly.

“Actually the kids thought it was a fun lesson!” Lynn continued. “We were using coloured balloons and testing out how temperature affected them, heating up the inside with a tea candle. But when the balloon popped- Gosh! You should’ve seen poor Kawa dive on the ground! That was unexpected! I’m trying but, hmmm, how do I structure my classroom so that each child’s needs are met?”

“Science is a great choice for Kawa to get involved,” Greg affirmed. “And Robbie’s been OK with Kawa, he hasn’t been acting out?”

“Oh no, he’s been good- when poor Kawa went under the table Robbie crawled in too. And then they sat together for a story. I thought with Robbie’s dad having been injured in Afghanistan and Kawa’s experience they might form a bond. They are both such brave boys.”

“Yes they are. And that’s why I wonder whether we need to rethink next month’s Anzac service,” Greg mused. “Last year’s speech by Lieutenant Parkes talked about the sacrifice of heroes with exceptional courage and the spirit of mateship. But I think we should remind our school that war has lasting effects on all people, not just the soldiers and their families. What do you think we should do to be more inclusive?”

Lynn thought for a moment. “I’m all for being inclusive. Anzac Day is more important to Aussies than Australia Day¹⁵! The sacrifices made by people like my Grandad are at its heart, and kids are the future custodians of the Anzac spirit- kids like Robbie whose families are part of the story. Traditions need to be maintained. When the RSL representatives arrive at the school assembly, the school captains should recite the Prayer for Peace first and then the poems- like A Hundred Years from Now¹⁶ and Flanders Fields¹⁷. The Department¹⁸ released this year’s Anzac Day package recently, so I’ll choose some pictures for quiet reflection while Lieutenant Parkes makes his comments and then you each lay the wreaths beside the memorial plaque. The catafalque party will be in formation while we listen to the Last Post and have a minute’s silence with the flag at half-mast. For class activities afterwards, I always bring in my Granddad’s war medals and encourage kids like Robbie to tell the class about their family’s military service. Anzac Day is not just about Gallipoli anymore, it’s about Australians’ fight for freedom and democracy everywhere. I don’t think we need to make changes to the way we’ve always commemorated their sacrifices.”

“Thanks, Lynn, you are very knowledgeable,” Greg smiled, though his concerns that the traditional approach would glorify war still lingered. How would children like Kawa, who had lost so much to war, experience this event? “Could you speak to your ideas at this afternoon’s staff meeting?”

¹⁵ Lake, M., Reynolds, H., McKenna, M., Damousi, J. (2010) What’s Wrong with Anzac: The militarisation of Australian History, NewSouth, (pp.112-120).

¹⁶ <https://youtu.be/ZquylaybGi8>

¹⁷ <https://youtu.be/K6BIOkpdkg8>

¹⁸ <https://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/latest-news-veterans/new-resources-help-educate-ahead-anzac-day>

At the end of the day, Greg made his way through the busy concrete path to the front of the school. “Khoda hafess Razia, see you tomorrow!”

A Grade Six girl wearing long sleeves adjusted her school-issued hijab over her hair. She playfully chided him, “It’s *khodahafez*, Mr Sefton!” She turned, hurrying her two younger sisters along while carrying their school bags on her shoulders. Greg’s smile slipped knowing the school-wide Anzac event would be unlikely to entice Razia’s mother or her grandmother from the family’s cramped apartment. Why would they leave their complex when just walking down the street in their traditional clothing made them a target? He had reached out to the local Mosque to organise an Iftar at school, the breaking of bread after sunset during this season’s Ramadan to make the school a more welcoming place for Muslim-refugee families like Kawa and Razia to visit. He called it a ‘sausage sizzle fundraiser’ to encourage the whole community to come in.

Greg turned to watch the bustling throng. One parent, a deeply tanned man in dusty hi-vis construction clothes, stood apart from the other parents. He had a slight limp as he approached the Principal; a visible reminder of the injuries he acquired in Afghanistan, though it was the hollowness of his eyes that Greg noticed most. Sometimes he saw that hollowness in his son, Robbie, too.

Greg caught his eye and approached. “Mr Jones, this is a surprise. I’m sure Robert was picked up by his mother earlier, is everything OK?”

“Yeah, he’s with her this week, that’s fine. I, well, we - the RSL local members - had a question for you. At our monthly meeting last week, we were wondering why you hadn’t made contact about Anzac day proceedings. The six of us have our uniforms pressed for the occasion, ready to form the catafalque¹⁹ around the school’s war memorial stone. We can be there at 9.45 for a 10am start?”

“That’s quite a few people in uniform,” Greg stalled, recalling Kawa’s trauma response in Lynn’s classroom.

Mr Jones’ pointed to the plaque embedded on the schoolgate, “These families are part of the school’s history. My grandfather went to Burnsley as a boy and his name is engraved right here - he fought at Gallipoli. Like most of us who served, I wouldn’t volunteer for the parade. But Robert needs to feel proud of his family, and he should know there is no more important day for the RSL than Anzac Day²⁰.”

Mr. Jones hesitated, and then continued. “You know these past couple of years have been hard on us. Anzac Day shows Robbie what we fought for, what I fought for, and what... who... we lost. And maybe he’ll understand why I wasn’t around when he needed me.” Mr Jones stopped abruptly.

Greg lifted the mood: “Robbie worked so hard in class this morning. You should be proud of him, he finished his work early. He’s even been helping one of the new students in science.”

Mr Jones looked pleasantly surprised.

Greg continued, “Maybe you can see it for yourself. Any chance you’d have time to help us with the Refugee fundraiser sausage sizzle? Actually, here comes Uncle Mo now—he can tell us more about it ”

¹⁹ <https://www.army.gov.au/our-heritage/traditions/catafalque-party> Catafalque parties are mounted around coffins as a sign of respect and around memorials on occasions of remembrance such as Anzac Day. The catafalque party consists of four members of an armed guard who stand, their heads bowed and their arms (weapon) reversed, facing outward approximately one metre from the catafalque as a symbolic form of respect for those who have fallen.

²⁰ <https://www.rslnsw.org.au/news/rsl-and-schools-remember-anzac-commemoration-2022/> and for RSL commemorative service 2022 see: <https://vimeo.com/694713395/c443cbae9f>

Mohammad approached the two men from across the school path with a broad smile after a welcoming hand gesture. Greg turned to introduce him to Mr Jones. "Meet Mohammad Kahn. Mo, meet Robbie's father, Mr Jones. Did you know that you share something in common- you were both with the Australian forces in Afghanistan?"

"Good to meet you," Mo said, gently.

Mr Jones stuttered, visibly lost to some memory, before composing himself, "G'day, Mo."

His awkward response reminded Greg how much he needed Anzac Day to bring the community together. Greg wished he knew how he was going to offer something that supported kids like Robbie without disturbing kids like Kawa at the same time.

The staff enjoyed their special afternoon tea prepared in the local Mosque kitchen. Greg reached for a sticky sweet to go with his coffee.

"Mmm... 'taj al malek', one of my favourites," grinned Uncle Mo, as the two bumped elbows and chuckled. Suddenly serious, Mo pulled Greg aside. "Listen, I wanted to talk to you before this Anzac Day discussion. I'm concerned that the school community doesn't appreciate how difficult it could be for our refugee families. Greg- you must encourage them to all stay home that day. Just look at Kawa's reaction today—that balloon wasn't a threat, yet he acted as though he was being shelled. How do you think he will feel when the soldiers come?"

"But they're part of our community," Greg began. "Did you ask them who will share their stories of—"

"Listen," Mohammad interrupted, lowering his voice, "Mr Al Ahmad didn't tell you this morning, but Kawa lost his mother and his brother to horrific circumstances in Syria. His brother was critically injured on his way to school and the local hospital was non-operational; they couldn't save him. It was only after his mother disappeared from the terrible camp at Al Hol that they managed to reunite Kawa with his father and get here, somehow, together²¹. He is not the only one, they all have trauma and stories of war - their war, not some British war over a hundred years ago. I spoke with the families yesterday. They do not want to share those stories for Anzac Day."

Greg swallowed uncomfortably. Greg had known a bit of Kawa's story but not these details. "What should we...?" his voice trailed off. He lifted his eyes to Mohammad and felt the weight he carried, just for a second. "I'm thinking hard about it, Mo, I promise. Let's start the meeting- lots to cover." He motioned Mo to a chair and sat down.

Greg looked at the drawn faces around the table. His team needed to build solidarity quickly, among the faculty as well as the students and families. He had hoped that Anzac Day's commemoration would be that opportunity, but now he worried more than ever that next month's event would divide, rather than unite, the community. There was no time to waste. What shape should Anzac Day take and to whom should the Anzac Spirit belong?

²¹ Fears grow for Syria amid rising violence, deepening humanitarian crisis, UN News: Global perspective Human stories, United Nations, 9/3/22 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113592>