



## A Uniform Decision: Community and Commemoration in Public School

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<https://justiceinschools.org>

*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.<sup>1</sup> 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 2018<sup>2</sup>). 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 Gallipoli<sup>4</sup>. Over 93% of Australians believe it should be commemorated each year<sup>5</sup>, with growing numbers attending dawn services around the country and expressing sympathy for military personnel’s sacrifices<sup>6</sup>. All public schools hold some version of Anzac Day service on site and it is compulsory learning in the Australian Curriculum (v8.4)<sup>7</sup>. 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)<sup>8</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18530\\_its\\_complex\\_centenary\\_report\\_digital.pdf](https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18530_its_complex_centenary_report_digital.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “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>

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

<sup>5</sup> <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>

<sup>6</sup> 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>

<sup>7</sup> 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>

<sup>8</sup> 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.

**Narrator:** Principal Greg Sefton watched Robbie Jones 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,'<sup>9</sup> the rules were clear when it came to fighting.

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

**Robbie** (*muttering*): "Yes, sir."

**Narrator:** Greg hoped that it would indeed be a good day. 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 during his suspension hadn't helped her situation. Meanwhile, after the divorce Robbie's father, a veteran of the Afghan war, had been in and out of shelters for two months. Robbie was clearly struggling with the upheaval in his home life.

**Greg** (*gently*): "What's one thing you can do to help make this a good day, Robbie?"

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

**Greg** (*avoiding the subject of Anzac Day*): "Best get to class. I'll come and check later to see how you're getting on."

**Narrator:** 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. Greg pondered the challenges he and his staff faced.

**Greg:** With so many refugee families coming in, the past few months have been a whirlwind of finding 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 have been hugely successful, like bringing on Mohammad Kahn to liaise and translate for Dari and Pashto-speaking families. He's so caring—they call him 'Uncle Mo.' It's a coup having someone with his background, an Afghan translator who risked everything to help the armed forces against the Taliban, end up in Burnsley repatriated under asylum.<sup>11</sup> I'm glad he can join me today to meet with Kawa and his father, Mr Al Ahmad—they've just arrived from Syria.

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

<sup>9</sup> A slang term for 'dirt poor'

<sup>10</sup> A slang term for 'a lazy good-for-nothing'

<sup>11</sup> 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/>

But there's still a lot of work to do to develop a truly welcoming and safe school culture. How will the staff respond to my ideas for intensive professional retraining in trauma-informed pedagogies? And then there's our Anzac Day commemoration. For decades, we've invited volunteers from the Returned and Services League. They arrive in uniform to fly the flag at half mast and sound the lone bugle<sup>12</sup>. With such a large community of veterans, the event is sacred here at Burnsley. But is exposing our refugee students, who have experienced so much trauma, to reminders of war a responsible thing to do? If we're going to bring in the RSL members—including Robbie's father—I've got to reach out to them soon. I'll talk about it with the staff before I make any decisions."

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**Narrator:** Opening the door to the Year Five classroom at his mid-morning break, Greg barely avoided colliding with a gaggle of students.

**Greg:** "Whoa there you lot, get an early mark?"

**Robbie** (*defensively*): "Miss Green said we could go to lunch early if we finished everything."

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

**Robbie:** "Can I go join the boys? They're already playing soldiers in the trees."

**Greg:** "Go on then."

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

**Greg:** "Hi Lynn, just wanted to see how the new kids were settling in?"

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

**Greg** (*gently chiding*): "They're all Aussie kids, Lynn."

**Lynn** (*correcting*): "Well, some are still trying for Protection Visas. 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; they need the extra attention. 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 quiet! I actually paired him with Robbie this morning, who seems a bit withdrawn lately."

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<sup>12</sup> For example, this 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>

**Greg** (*encouraging*): “And?”

**Lynn**: “The kids thought it was a fun lesson! 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! I’m trying but, hmmm, how do I structure my classroom so that each child’s needs are met?”

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

**Lynn**: “Oh no, he’s been good- when poor Kawa went under the table Robbie crawled in too. 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.”

**Greg**: “Yes they are. And that’s why I wonder whether we need to rethink next month’s Anzac service. 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**: “I’m all for being inclusive. Anzac Day is more important to Aussies than Australia Day<sup>13</sup>! 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 [*pronounced- katafolk*] party will be in formation while we listen to the Last Post 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.”

**Greg** (*hiding his lingering concerns*): “Thanks, Lynn, you are very knowledgeable. Could you speak to your ideas at this afternoon’s staff meeting?”

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**Narrator**: At the end of the day, Greg watched as Razia, a Grade Six girl wearing long sleeves adjusted her school-issued hijab over her hair, hurried 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

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<sup>13</sup> Lake, M., Reynolds, H., McKenna, M., Damousi, J. (2010) What’s Wrong with Anzac: The militarisation of Australian History, NewSouth, (pp.112-120).

<sup>14</sup> <https://youtu.be/ZquylaybGi8> A Hundred Years from Now and <https://youtu.be/K6BIOkpdkg8> In Flanders Field

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? Greg turned as one parent approached: a deeply tanned man in dusty hi-vis construction clothes, with a slight limp from injuries he had 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:** "Mr Jones, this is a surprise. I'm sure Robert was picked up by his mother earlier, is everything OK?"

**Mr. Jones:** "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 form the catafalque<sup>15</sup> [*pronounced- katafolk*] around the school's war memorial stone. We can be there at 9.45 for a 10am start?"

**Greg (stalling):** "That's quite a few people in uniform."

**Mr Jones (with feeling):** "Veteran families are part of the school's history. My grandfather went to Burnsley as a boy and his name is engraved right there on that plaque - he fought at Gallipoli. Robert should know there is no more important day for the RSL than Anzac Day<sup>16</sup>. 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."

**Greg (lifting the mood):** "Robbie worked so hard in class this morning. You should be proud of him. He's even been helping one of the new students in science. 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 "

**Mohammad:** "Hello!"

**Greg:** "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?"

**Mohammad (gently):** "Good to meet you."

**Mr Jones (stuttering, visibly shaken):** "G'day, Mo."

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<sup>15</sup> <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.

<sup>16</sup> <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>

**Narrator:** Mr. Jones' anxious 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.

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**Narrator:** At the staff meeting, Mohammad approached Greg.

**Mohammad:** "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? "

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

**Mohammad (interrupting):** "Listen, Mr Al Ahmad didn't tell you this morning, but Kawa lost his mother and his brother to horrific circumstances in Syria. 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, together<sup>17</sup>. 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 (stricken):** "What should we.....? I'm thinking hard about it, Mo, I promise. Let's start the meeting—lots to cover."

**Narrator:** 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?

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<sup>17</sup> 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>