



## Article

# Culturally Respectful and Competent Practice: What It Looks Like for Organisations Providing Services to Migrant Youth within the Illawarra Region of New South Wales, Australia

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**Abstract:** The question of culturally respectful and competent practice is important for human services, particularly in Australia, which is characterised by a highly culturally diverse population as a result of migration. On arrival in Australia, migrants start using local services which they anticipate to be appropriate to their culture, situations and aspirations. This study explored what culturally respectful and competent practice looks like for organisations working with migrant youth in the Illawarra region of the state of New South Wales using in-depth interviews and focus groups. Although our focus was youth, responses were more broad to reflect the day-to-day roles of participants. From the responses, themes that came out included awareness of own culture as a practitioner and understanding the cultures of service users; paying attention to service user views of the dominant culture; employing staff from refugee and migrant communities; interpreter services; supporting practitioners in addressing agency limitations; and use of a strengths-based approach. What is central to these themes is capacitating human resources with cultural knowledge and a tendency towards prioritising service users' interpretation of their culture and addressing the disadvantage and injustice that arise from cultural differences. For the organisations, a key barrier to achieving this is inadequate financial resources. In view of these findings, we conclude that, in relation to the topic and organisations we investigated, culturally respectful and competent practice means embedding service user cultural interpretations and priorities in organisational employment practices, staff skilling and service delivery in order to achieve the best and sustainable cultural, social and economic settlement outcomes.

**Keywords:** cultural competence; culturally respectful practice; migrants; refugees; youths



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## 1. Introduction

Australia is a host country to migrants from different parts of the world—Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Pacific and South America. This makes culturally respectful practice an important part of human services in the country. When migrants arrive in Australia, they start using local services; some services are needed immediately, while others are needed in the medium to long term. When services are being used, there is an anticipation of services that are appropriate to the migrant's situations. This is often difficult to achieve but needed nonetheless. For this research, we explored how culturally respectful practice was practiced by organisations that are providing support to migrant youth in the Illawarra Region, one of the regions of the State of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. This paper begins by giving some background to the topic, followed by a summary of the methods. The findings are then presented, ending with a discussion.

Between 1 October 2019 and 31 December 2019, the Department of Home Affairs recorded a total of 23,667 arrivals from humanitarian, family and skilled migration streams

that settled in NSW, of which 6455 were between the ages of 12 and 24 years old ([Department of Home Affairs 2020](#)). In the year ending mid-2022, the total number of arrivals was 62,210 people. Within the youth cohort, 613 settled within the Illawarra across the local government areas of Wollongong, Coffs Harbour, Shoalhaven and Kiama ([Department of Home Affairs 2020](#)). This was the highest record in all states and territories of Australia.

Some of the migrants are former refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Within the Illawarra, 331 former refugees were settled in Australia from Congo, Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Burundi and Iran in 2019, and 193 were settled in 2022 from Syria, Iraq, Congo, Myanmar and Ukraine ([Wollongong City Council 2022](#)).

The [Australian Bureau of Statistics \(ABS\) \(2022a\)](#) reported that the Illawarra population grew by 3410 people between June 2021 and June 2022. Of these, 1781 settled from overseas. There are multiple services provided to support settlement ([Wollongong City Council 2022](#)). These include the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) funded by the Federal Department of Social Services (DSS) and delivered by the Australian Red Cross for up to 18 months after arrival ([Australian Bureau of Statistics \(ABS\) \(2022b\)](#)). The DSS also funds the Specialised and Intensive Services (SIS) for up to five years after arrival and provides additional support through the Settlement Services Program (SSP) from six months to five years after arrival. At the state level, Multicultural NSW, whose vision is 'a stronger NSW, using our cultural diversity as a vehicle to achieve cultural and economic prosperity', provides direction for the planning and implementation of settlement services by both government and non-government actors ([Multicultural NSW 2023](#), p. 4). Multicultural NSW's main strategy for refugee settlement services for 2023 to 2025 is the NSW Settlement Strategy, which values service user experience, service appropriateness, use of evidence, and successful settlement outcomes socially, economically and culturally. Other services provided by the state, councils and non-government partners cover health, language, employment, education, houses, community, children and youth services. The non-government actors include Illawarra Multicultural Services (IMS), Multicultural Communities Council Illawarra (MCCI), Strategic Community Assistance to Refugee Families (SCARF), Southern Youth and Family Services (SYFS) and Anglicare Family Services ([Wollongong City Council 2022](#)). The non-state actors faced challenges that included limited funding for direct and indirect costs, including human resources ([Wollongong City Council 2022](#)).

Even with all this support, often, youth from refugee and migrant backgrounds face a lack of dignified livelihood opportunities; discrimination, racism and hostility from host community members; restricted mobility and sense of agency; differential treatment within their own communities or camps, due to factors such as their gender, nationality, ethnicity and (dis)ability; and limited access to quality education, including a lack of secondary and higher education opportunities ([Evans et al. 2013](#)). Health problems have also been reported ([Dowling et al. 2022](#); [Sawrikar and Katz 2014](#)). It should be noted that some of these challenges are also prevalent in the general youth population, including adults.

These 'challenges may include negotiating a cultural identity that balances their conflicting needs for cultural preservation and for cultural adaptation, establishing a sense of belonging in Australia [but maintaining belonging to their families, countries or continent of origin], coping with perceived or experienced racism and discrimination, culture clashes across generations, socioeconomic disadvantage and/or a lack of family, social and community supports' ([Griffiths et al. 2009](#), p. 33). To address these and other challenges, families use their existing strategies and processes, but if these become inadequate, they seek the support of service providers ([Ochala and Mungai 2016](#); [Mugumbate et al. 2020](#)). When they seek outside support, families expect that services will be culturally competent ([Mugumbate et al. 2020](#); [Griffiths et al. 2009](#)).

Current research identifies culturally respectful and competent practice as a key factor in human services ([Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#); [Sawrikar and Katz 2014](#)) including in aiding the social inclusion and integration of migrant populations ([Calma 2006](#); [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)). However, the literature deals more with culturally competence that

culturally respectful practice. Culturally respectful practice refers to the extent to which structures, policies and processes and providers are aware of and responsive to cultural needs and experiences ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023](#)). Specific examples of what culturally respectful and safe practice in reference to Indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Islander people to include employing Indigenous staff (doctors, nurses, sexual health workers and 'traditional' health practitioners) and providing interpreter services and Indigenous education ([Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2023](#)).

Cultural competence traditionally refers to service provider knowledge of cultural values, norms and traditions ([Ben-Ari and Strier 2010](#)) or behaviours, attitudes and policies that allow effective interventions in cross-cultural situations ([Calma 2006](#)). Another view of cultural competence, which can be termed the colonial view, was described by [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker \(2021\)](#) as that which places the colonising culture at the front, and puts minority cultures at the periphery. All minority populations are expected to be integrated into the majority culture, and failure to integrate is viewed as deviance. In this approach, the objectives of cultural competence include controlling, culturalising and integrating minority populations whose values are viewed as deviant to the majority culture ([Ben-Ari and Strier 2010](#); [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)).

Knowledge about others and their culture is no longer enough to characterise someone as culturally competent ([Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2018](#)). The knowledge possessed by those people needing social services, and their experience is more valuable than that of the social worker ([Ben-Ari and Strier 2010](#); [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2018](#)). This is because social workers no longer work for people but with them collaboratively, engagingly and 'listeningly' ([Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)). Social problems among migrant populations are not merely a result of individual cultural differences ([Eliassi 2017](#)) but that of more structural issues such as privilege, power, racism, discrimination and poverty ([Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)). As [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker \(2021\)](#) show, cultural competence should involve more critical perspectives such as acknowledging the intersectionalities (e.g., gender, ethnicity and class, [Eliassi 2015](#)) and power dynamics that impact the social situations of migrant populations. [Durey \(2010\)](#) agrees with the assertion that knowledge of culture is not equal to competent practice, and further adds that the social worker should achieve self-awareness of their position, knowledge and culture and how this impacts their work at all levels of social work.

Cultural competence is not the same as culturalization, which is defined as 'a process where given situations, problems or differences are interpreted and explained on the basis of generalized cultural interpretations, rather than structural and institutional mechanisms related to individual and social positions' ([Rugkåsa et al. 2017](#), p. 1). Where cultural competence is valued, it is acknowledged that Western interventions applied are not universal ([Mollah et al. 2018](#); [Wells et al. 2015](#)). Cultural competence promotes reflexivity of one's own stance on culture and how this impacts their attitudes, beliefs and practices, it encourages seeing value in the culture of those around them and who they work with and challenges the power imbalance of the service user-worker relationship.

Traditional cultural competence frameworks have been critiqued for being essentialist, risky, unethical, colonial, oppressive and focusing too much on minority groups, and the lack of a transformative social justice agenda ([Fisher-Borne et al. 2015](#); [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)). Several approaches have been proposed to address the inadequacies of the traditional cultural competence approach. [Dean \(2001\)](#), for example, called for social workers to focus on the reverse, that is, their incompetence—what they do not know about other cultures and their prejudices. Related to [Dean \(2001\)](#)'s idea is the call for cultural humility ([Ortega and Faller 2011](#)) and constructive and reflective practice ([Nadan 2017](#)). Cultural humility is seen as promoting self-awareness by making individuals reflect on their own relationship with culture, and the ways this impacts their view of the world ([Ortega and Faller 2011](#)). To achieve cultural humility, there is need to reflect on and address power imbalances, acknowledging shortcomings when it comes to knowing about complexities of other people's cultures ([Ortega and Faller 2011](#); [Nadan 2017](#)). [Nadan \(2017\)](#)'s reflective

cultural competence approach takes a constructivist approach, as opposed to an essentialist one. According to [Nadan \(2017\)](#), to achieve cultural competence, social workers need to focus and reflect on contextuality and power relations in their work. The cultural, social, political and global context shapes people's experiences and the meanings ([Sousa and Almeida 2016](#)).

The critical and decolonial objectives of culturally respectful and competent practice in social work is to understand and challenge oppression and disadvantage ([Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)). [Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker \(2021\)](#) called workers to focus on intersecting issues such as those arising from culture, class, gender, ethnicity and disability and enhanced open communication between the social worker and service user and balancing of what the worker knows and the experiences and understandings of the service user. Also important is how the service user defines their situation or problem and what they prioritise in interventions ([Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021](#)).

The key question addressed in this research was what culturally respectful and competent practice looks like for organisations working with migrant youth in the Illawarra region.

## 2. Methods

The researchers sought to understand what culturally respectful and competent practice looked like for the managers or employees and how is it practised by organisations working with migrant youth in the Illawarra region, in the state of New South Wales, Australia. The main reason for choosing the state of New South Wales was because it is the largest receiver of migrants on a per capita basis in Australia, including youth. At the time of data collection, the corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was at its peak, making it difficult to recruit outside the Illawarra region.

The research targeted managers and employees of organisations (names are not included to maintain anonymity of participants) that work with and provide services and/or programs to refugee and migrant youth. Youths were targeted because researchers were already conducting research with this age group on migration services. Purposive sampling was applied, and 13 that were presumed to provide youth services were targeted. The organisations were approached by emailing their respective managers, who were asked to pass the message on to their employees. Interested managers and employees were advised to contact the research team if interested, upon which they received a consent form and information statement. The information statement held detailed information about the research, risks, benefits and contacts to enable potential participants to decide to participate or not. Resultantly, the participants included six managers and twelve employees from six organisations. All managers were females, were aged between 28 and 52 years and had work experience ranging from 2 to 15 years; all had a tertiary qualification; three identified as linguistically and culturally diverse; and none identified as Indigenous to Australia. For the employees, eight were females and four were male; their ages ranged from 20 to 45; they had work experience ranging from nine months to eight years; three had a tertiary qualification; four identified as linguistically and culturally diverse; and none identified as Indigenous to Australia. The organisations provided diverse services including settlement support, education, employment and health support. Three organisations exclusively provided services to migrant populations across all ages, while the other three provided services to all populations but had specific programs for migrant youths.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with managers and focus groups with employees. Focusing on both managers and employees allowed us to hear different perspectives at two levels of the organisations and also ensured that there was comparison of data. Four of the interviews were conducted with individual managers, while one had two managers. Interviews were considered the most appropriate way to gather in-depth from the organisations. Three focus groups were held with groups of three, four and five employees. Employees for each focus group were from one organisation. Focus groups afforded a more comfortable space to discuss the topic and were suitable for the employees who worked as teams. Two separate data collection guides were constructed



for the managers and employees, respectively, with guiding statements on their services; how they were working with youth; and what cultural competence or culturally respectful practice meant for them as well as barriers and facilitators. Both the in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted online, went for a duration of one hour each and were audio recorded with consent from the participants prior to the beginning of the interview.

Reflective thematic analysis approach was adopted. This process included firstly, transcribing the data using a computer software and revising to correct errors before sharing with participants to check over and approve of the accuracy. This member checking is crucial in research to ensure that analysis is grounded in the ideas and experiences of the participants to ensure validity (Reviere 2001; Chilisa 2014) and also to maintain good relations between researchers and research participants (Chilisa et al. 2017; Khupe and Keane 2017). In the reflective approach, researcher two first organised the data and created codes in Nvivo and then shared with researcher one, who then contributed to the organisation and themes. The authors then sat down to reflect, discuss, refine and name themes together ensuring accuracy and rigour.

Throughout the research, the researchers maintained good relations with participants and their organisations, which is crucial for the research community (Chilisa et al. 2017; Khupe and Keane 2017). This project received ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong, Ethics Reference Number 2019/114. Informed consent was obtained from participants through providing an information sheet detailing the purpose and process of the research project, particularly regarding confidentiality, the use and storage of data gathered from participants, interview and focus group processes, background and contact information of the researchers involved, and the value in their participation. A consent form was provided separately to the information sheet, and it was up to the participant to sign and send it back if willing to participate. No incentives were given. Participants were allocated codes to ensure they could not be identified in the reporting of data. Participants were coded numbers for anonymity.

One limitation of this study is a small sample size of participants, relative to the Illawarra region that limits the ability to generalise results. As alluded to earlier, COVID-19 impacted on recruitment due to changes in work programs and limited time on the part of organisations that were involved on the mitigation of the virus. Data collection had to be conducted online due to social distancing restrictions due to COVID-19, as opposed to face to face, which could have fostered a smoother flow of interview questioning. Further, this could have allowed us to read body language better during the interviewing process, which could have aided our judgement on to what to ask about. Another limitation, though minor, was that participants tended to speak about the organisation's services more broadly, not youth specific issues, even though we prompted.

### 3. Results

The researchers sought to understand what culturally respectful and competent practice looked like for the managers or employees and how it is practised by organisations working with migrant youth in the Illawarra region, in the state of New South Wales, Australia. The analysis identified seven re-occurring themes: awareness of own culture as a practitioner and understanding the cultures of service users; paying attention to service user views of the dominant culture; employing staff from refugee and migrant communities; interpreter services; supporting practitioners in addressing agency limitations; a strengths-based approach. These themes are elaborated in turn.

#### 3.1. *Awareness of Own Culture as a Practitioner and Understanding the Cultures of Service Users*

Fundamental to discussing the concept of culturally respectful and competent practice were practitioners' understandings of their own culture, what it meant to them and how it impacted them, and their experiences of cultures outside of their own. Meanings of culturally respectful and competent practice included a worker's own perceptions of, experiences with, and desire and humility when learning about culture; organisational

values and structure in place; organisational support for and provision of training in cultural competence and/or in soft skills training relative to cross-cultural work; organisational provision and encouragement of professional supervision and debriefing for practitioners; and organisational employee demographic and community context.

To me, it's about awareness, first of all, of you, of who you are, your own identity, and how that impacts on others, and understanding other people, you know, backgrounds as well, and acceptance of that. So, looking at differences is important, but also looking at commonalities is important. A lot of people talk about culture in a context of, 'oh, that's, that's what they're used to' and 'that's what happens', you know, and 'this is what happens in their culture'. And I think it's utilized as a tool for further discrimination, and for you know, putting people in further disadvantage. . . (Manager 1)

It was commonly pointed out that cultural competence training was not enough and could not lead practitioners to understand or appreciate the nuances of culture.

Look, I find it challenging, the notion that we are to know every culture and I'm an expert of culture. I don't believe that you can train on cultural competence, you know, workshop session. I think it's a forever changing game. And I feel we need to embrace it with curiosity and being humble and, placing that back to the person we're working with. (Manager 3)

Most participants then highlighted a shift to practising values and principles aligned with cultural humility and curiosity.

And also, I think we can't assume that every person in every culture would have the same, will follow the same, values or so. So, I think it's being flexible, respectful, and asking the questions and understanding or being ready to change the approach. And asking the questions is what gives us that cultural competence. I'm assuming that we don't know anything. (Manager 3)

So cultural competence, is, it's about what I understand is about awareness of my own, my own my background, my class, my ethnicity, my gender, and, and my walk-in life. . . (Manager 1)

Their definitions explored practice as needing to focus more on asking the right questions, not making assumptions, appropriate use of interpreters, recognising one's own views and origins of culture and how this implicates their practice, and continuous critical self-reflection and learning.

### *3.2. Paying Attention to Service User Views of the Dominant Culture*

One theme that came out of the study was how workers encountered clashes over assimilation and acculturation. Some service users who they worked with viewed some services as not appropriate for them, and instead fostered assimilation and acculturation into the dominant Australian culture. Adult members of the families were said to be more worried, and they acted as guards against their own children so that they value and maintain their culture instead of replacing it with that of the host country.

It's very difficult for the young person being in school or if they've come here at an early age or been born here in Australia, they're growing up with conflictual messages. It's almost a clash of cultures and that can cause some uneasiness and upheaval at home because the parent or carer is seeing their child go off in a different direction that they don't approve of because it's clashing with their belief system, it's really difficult for those young people, they're torn between two roles and they're trying to balance it. (Employee 1)

The young people are said to be receiving conflicting messages, values and knowledge. This causes clashes at home, and in the community.

The young people when they go to school, they try to assimilate themselves into the dominant culture. Also, because of the language barrier, at home they bicker

because their parents are not speaking English. There is a reverse of the family structure, they [the young people] are the leaders, anything they [the family] want to do, like to go to Centrelink [a welfare service], they are the one doing it, so when the parents try to educate them or guide them. . . it becomes a problem. (Employee 2)

Participants emphasised the need to pay attention to services, to ensure that they are not promoting assimilation and acculturation which families dislike even though children may not see anything wrong at their age.

### 3.3. *Employment of Staff from Refugee and Migrant Communities*

It was expressed that employing more workers with a refugee or migrant background is important in being able to offer ethnically matched practitioners, where clients may feel more comfortable to engage, and disclose information. However, it was stated that the responsibility to foster this inclusivity must be shared between all staff instead of leaving staff from refugee and migrant communities to perform all the cultural work.

If we are meant to be working with migrants or refugees, we need to be diverse. . . . We had more than half (staff) that were Anglo Australians, and not necessarily from other cultural backgrounds. And so, I came in and slowly changed it, now it is completely different. . . . And, we have diversity in terms of cultural backgrounds and I'm always looking for diversity when we are interviewing for new positions. (Manager 1)

Organizational managers went further to state that employing staff from refugee and migrant communities builds on employee and organizational capacity to work with diversity. It was noted though by managers that finding workers with the required training and experience was limited, which hindered their ability to hire workers with the appropriate background even when they wanted to.

At an organizational level I think we do try to recruit people from various communities, I think there's a problem in getting the people who have the proper training and that can master that sort of thing but we do try but that's something we could probably do better. So that's a challenge and an issue as well. (Manager 2)

Another concern raised was the impossibility of having staff from refugee and migrant backgrounds for all cultural groups. This was limited because of resources, positions available in the organisation, but also the fact that organisations dealt with several cultural groups.

To actually be equipped to respond to diversity in an appropriate way you can't, like, it's impossible for an organization to have all, like, if you have, you know 10 or 12 different communities that you're working with, to have a worker for each of those. That's just not a possibility. But we need to be able to respond to that in an appropriate and culturally sensitive way. Not necessarily, 'we have to have somebody who speaks your language all the time', because you simply can't do so. (Manager 1)

Other concerns were that, while staff from refugee and migrant backgrounds could be employed, it was often not feasible for them to perform all the work available in an organisation. As participant Manager 4 pointed out, '... it's important that the 'cultural work' isn't just left to [the] workers.'

### 3.4. *Interpreter Services*

Interpreter services were mentioned consistently across the discussions. It was acknowledged as important to facilitating culturally respectful and competent practice, in regard to language barriers. However, it was mainly discussed as a key challenge to effective practice due to issues with the professionalism of certain interpreters accessed, and the lack of availability and specialised dialects of the available interpreters. Staff highlighted that in using interpreters, if factors such as ethnic matching, community affiliation, and

privacy and confidentiality were not discussed with the client, this acted as a barrier to culturally competent practice.

Yeah, so lots of dialects within languages that sometimes it's really hard to find an interpreter that speaks that dialect, it can be really problematic and I think conflicts of interest can be an issue especially if we can't find an interpreter that's appropriate. (Employee 4)

However, it was also noted that being able to use employees from refugee and migrant backgrounds as interpreters was incredibly resourceful and inviting for clients accessing the service.

### 3.5. Support for Practitioners

Organisational support for practitioners was seen as facilitative to culturally respectful and competent practice when consistent, open and professional supervision and debriefing was provided. Further, practitioners with refugee and migrant backgrounds especially felt supported if they were encouraged to access that support, if their managers were from refugee and migrant backgrounds themselves, and when there was a feeling of friendship as well as the professional relationship.

If I'm having a rough day in regards to hearing a story that might bring up something personal for me, I can always go to my manager and have a conversation about it, or a colleague that works in the same team as me. (Employee 5)

Yet managers did state that resource demand did limit the level of supervision, specifically reflexive practice, that there was not enough time nor space to do this. This was desired by managers in order to make sure workers without proper training, like social work training, could be given the opportunity to contextualise their thoughts, processes and practices into broader theoretical practices and models.

So, I think the region has not had a lot of social workers trained in this context. So, the organizations have always historically tended to employ people, because of abc, whatever it is, yeah. And I think then that is a bit hard when you don't have a conceptual framework, as a practice framework. That's sadly, more difficult, because everybody does what they think they should do themselves. (Manager 1)

Limited resources made it challenging to keep up with support for new and emerging refugee and migrant backgrounds communities, and policies often acted as barriers to building rapport and trust when accepting gifts and engaging in cultural practices of families. Yet organisational supervision and support provided to practitioners was identified as a key facilitator to effectively engaging in culturally competent practice, but reflexive practice was discussed as still restricted by resources available.

### 3.6. Agency Limitations

Practitioners stated various challenges in keeping up with new and emerging refugee and migrant communities in the Illawarra, in particular, keeping up to date with appropriate knowledge and practices of new cultures they have not previously worked with. A theme consistent across the research was agency collaboration and partnership. This is seen as a key facilitator to culturally competent practice. Managers and employees both highlighted that agency collaboration and partnership enabled their own services to reach out to culturally specific organisations for relevant advice and referrals that they could not provide themselves.

I guess what we find beneficial is that we're able to better support our client's needs, so it's better to collaborate with services that do have those specialties because we're able to learn from them and we're able to better support the family's goals. So, I think it's a collaborative process I find that really beneficial. (Employee 4)



Ultimately, collaborating and partnering with relevant agencies provided reciprocity in knowledge building and service improvement. Engaging in community helps organisations gain knowledge and keep up to date around areas outside of their specialty. Yet it was pointed out that more service collaboration was needed between services to highlight exactly what supports are provided in the Illawarra, as well as more service clarity and translation for refugee and migrant service users. Funding was further highlighted as needed for providing extra assistance such as English classes and technological resources to clients.

Extra funding would be really useful especially for closing the gap for kids that are far behind. And having that extra English work, especially if the parents are illiterate or do not speak English, then it's really hard for those kids and they get further and further behind because they don't have anyone to help them with work, they've probably missed massive chunks of their learning and they really need something to catch them up on. (Employee 1)

### 3.7. *Strengths-Based Approach*

A strengths-based approach was identified as key when advocating for service user needs and creating sustainable services, in particular, identifying what families wanted, recognising their resilience, and respecting and validating cultural norms and behaviours. Within this, however, personal bias and power dynamics between practitioners and clients was highlighted as being critical to be aware of.

We work on a strengths-based model so really building up on their strengths and what they know, their knowledge and really working to create a safe environment for the families as well, so that it doesn't come across as judgmental. (Employee 3)

In this case, Employee 3 was saying families have strengths which should be utilised by service providers. Manager 3 supported a strengths perspective and went on to describe this in the context of young people.

I think it's really important to look at the experiences of the young people as the strength, you know, . . . these young people are really resilient, they're here, because they've overcome all these things then our role is to facilitate that further growth so that they can succeed even more. So, it's that strength-based approach, it's asking the questions, it's just being super respectful and non-judgmental. (Manager 3)

This means that strengths included people's experiences and the capacity of the families to address the challenges they face and that the role of the practitioner was that of a catalyst and not a judge. Dealing with practitioner bias was mentioned as important in fostering a strengths approach.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Human resource-related factors are central to most themes from our findings: employing staff from a migrant background, and employee support and interpreter services. The literature on migrant services seems to be supporting this theme; however, a closer look shows that a focus on human resources supports a knowledge-based framework instead of a reflective (Nadan 2017; Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021) and transformational approach advocated by Fisher-Borne et al. (2015). While the reflective approach still focuses on the worker, it places importance on self-awareness and creating open reciprocal communication with service users. This allows service users to define their situation or problem and priorities in interventions (Rugkåsa and Ylvisaker 2021). Transformational approaches are more interested in power dynamics and structural factors that give rise to disadvantage. The implications are that (1) more work is required to give service users a stronger voice in services and (2) more training or capacity building should be directed at helping human resources to translate knowledge of cultural differences into strategies to deal with the disadvantage that arise from the cultural differences.

Employing staff with a refugee or migrant background was identified as important to representing the diversity of the communities that organisations work with; however, this was not always achieved. Employing staff with a refugee background would enable organisations to offer ethnically matched workers to clients, as well as an ability to interpret appropriately and resourcefully. It was also found that this helps to foster a culturally inclusive workplace for workers from a refugee and migrant background and those who are not. Alongside the literature, our research also highlighted, however, that finding workers with a refugee or migrant background who were capable and trained appropriately was difficult (Sawrikar and Katz 2014; Botfield et al. 2017). This was a significant barrier to employing staff from refugee and migrant backgrounds, of which future research should explore the reasons for a lack of training and engagement of workers with a refugee and migrant background in this field. Although the previous findings are consistent with the literature, our research highlights two more important points. Our research highlights that workers with refugee and migrant backgrounds can use personal experiences of settling into Australia to recognise their client's resilience and to help foster genuine rapport and trust. However, in doing so, managers must have available appropriate supports for workers with a refugee or migrant background where they can access culturally appropriate support, supervision and/or debriefing if desired.

Using a strengths perspective would address challenges of practitioner bias. For example, what practitioners may see as a good service might actually be assimilatory or acculturatory. Young people face a difficult situation because they are young, and may have a tendency to copy young people of the host country. As said, it does not mean that Australians have no culture; they have a culture that competes with the cultures of refugee and migrant communities. Influenced by friends, media and school environments, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are urged to adopt most aspects Australian culture, which does not go well with adult members of the family. When practitioners look at this situation, they are most likely to appreciate the young people's views as opposed to their family, yet taking a family approach is necessary (Ochala and Mungai 2016; Mugumbate et al. 2020). But this dynamic may change if the practitioner is from a refugee and migrant background or culturally competent; in this case, they are likely to use cultural humility and strengths approaches. As Wells, Wells and Laws (Wells et al. 2015, p. 63) argued, assuming that practitioners can identify issues and symptoms correctly all the time in a different cultural context is wrong.

Funding and evidence-based criteria were also considered as barriers to effective and sustainable program management and development. Our research highlighted that often, funding requirements fell short to cater for resources that enhanced the effectiveness of services, for example, technology such as laptops. This challenge is also highlighted in the NSW Settlement Strategy as an impediment to partnership with non-state actors (Multicultural NSW 2023). Managers also highlighted that the present focus on programs needing to be evidence-based was too rigid and promotes a one-size-fits-all approach rather than a flexible and tailored approach. This was said to waste time as even when given an evidence-based program or model followed, these organisations had to tailor their approach to meet the differing needs of clients.

In view of these findings, we conclude that, in relation to the topic and organisations we investigated, culturally respectful and competent practice means embedding service user cultural interpretations and priorities in organisational employment practices, staff skilling and service delivery in order to achieve best and sustainable cultural, social and economic settlement outcomes. This definition supports a strengths perspective which is seen as prioritising service user interpretations of their culture. Further, the definition acknowledges the role of human resources in achieving and sustaining culturally respectful and competent practice.

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