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The Intergenerational settlement of refugee children in New Zealand

A report on the findings of a survey conducted for the New Zealand Refugee and
Migrant Service

The Intergenerational Settlement of Refugee Children in New Zealand: 1945 - 1985

Introduction

A refugee has been defined, under the United Nations 1951 Convention, as a person who:

"...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country..."

The refugee issue is a massive global problem. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are approximately 20 million people of concern, who fall under their mandate, in the world today. It is estimated that approximately 10,000 people are added to this figure daily. More than 80% of these people are currently living in the world's poorest countries. The UNHCR have helped an estimated 50 million people to restart their lives in the past 50 years. Many of them have been integrated into the country, or region, to which they initially fled. This is usually the closest safe neighbour of the refugees home country, and is known as the "country of first asylum". Others have returned to their home country, once conditions there sufficiently improved. A few, an estimated 1% of the world's refugees, have been permanently resettled in a country beyond the country of first asylum.

New Zealand has been involved in refugee resettlement in a major way since 1944. While many countries accept refugees, New Zealand is currently one of only twelve countries in the world that has an annual refugee quota. In order to be accepted for resettlement under the New Zealand Refugee Quota Programme, people must be formally classified by the UNHCR as refugees in need of resettlement. The UNHCR nominate refugees for resettlement in New Zealand, and, at present, up to 750 are accepted annually under the government's quota programme. With its family reunification programme, the total number of refugees who arrive in New Zealand is greater than 750. In the 2001-2002 year, 1453 refugees were resettled in New Zealand.

New Zealand's involvement in refugee resettlement during the last half of the 20th century has been innovative and flexible. In the late 1940s it was willing to resettle single mothers with children, displaced in the aftermath of World War II. In 1959 New Zealand was the first country in the world to accept refugee families that contained handicapped members. In 1989 New Zealand was only the second country in the world to allocate places for woman-at-risk in their refugee quota.

The first major refugee group to be resettled in New Zealand were 733 Polish children, and 105 accompanying adults, who arrived in 1944. It was originally envisaged that New Zealand would be merely a temporary refuge until the war ended. However, the political situation in Poland at the end of World War II meant it was not feasible for most of these children to return to their homeland. Consequently, New Zealand became their permanent home and New Zealand's refugee resettlement programme began. New Zealand was to accept 4500 displaced European refugees, unable or unwilling to return to their home countries, for resettlement between 1949 and 1952. They were

followed by 1000 Hungarian refugees, displaced by the uprising against Hungary's Communist government in 1956.

During the 1960s Chinese refugees were accepted from Hong Kong and Indonesia. Repression in Czechoslovakia saw the resettlement of over 100 Czechoslovaks between 1968 and 1971. The 1960s and 1970s also saw the arrival of one of the more unusual refugee groups to be resettled in New Zealand. Russian fundamentalist Christians, known as the "Old Believers", arrived from China. Ugandan Asians, Chileans, Jews from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europeans fleeing Communist regimes all arrived during the 1970s and 1980s. Huge numbers of Indo-Chinese, fleeing the after effects of war in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos arrived in New Zealand during this period. In the 1980s New Zealand's refugee quota was almost exclusively from this region. Persecution and conflict in the Middle East throughout the 1980s and 1990s saw the arrival of refugees from Iran (particularly Bahai's), Iraqi and Afghanistan. Over the past decade refugees from Burma, Somalia, Ethiopia Sri Lanka, Sudan and the Balkan states have found sanctuary in New Zealand.

Background to the Survey

While New Zealand has accepted the refugees for resettlement for almost 60 years, there is little information available on what has happened to them after the resettlement processes finished. The Refugee and Migrant Service (RMS) were interested in finding out what has happened to some of the children who came to New Zealand as refugees. They were aware that a number of refugee families have been extremely successful in resettling in New Zealand. They had a feeling that the children who arrived as refugees have, on the whole, made a very positive contribution to their adopted country. However, this information was mainly anecdotal, and the RMS were interested in obtaining more substantive data on the matter.

The Nature of the Survey

The RMS were particularly interested in the academic and vocational qualifications obtained by former refugee children. They were also interested in the occupations taken up by these children.

Although there would be a huge number of variables that would affect the progress of refugee children in the education system of their new homeland, we decided on the following few key factors that were relatively easy to measure:

- The country of origin/ethnic group they belonged to
- Their age on arrival in New Zealand
- The length of time they, or their family, were displaced prior to re-settlement in New Zealand
- The opportunity, during displacement, to attend school regularly and/or study English
- Their ability to understand English when they first arrived in New Zealand

The year, 1944, was chosen so the Polish children could be included in the survey. The cut-off date of 1995 would allow a number of the most recent young refugees to also be included. The age cut-off point, of 14 years or younger on arrival, meant that everyone

included in the survey would have attended school for at least one year after coming to New Zealand.

The RMS wrote a letter of introduction that outlined the purpose of the survey. They also provided me with a list of leaders of former refugee communities. The survey questionnaires and letters of introduction, were distributed within the ethnic groups that had arrived as refugees. The survey was also promoted in ethnic group newsletters. The RMS also provided me with the names and addresses of a number of individual former refugees, who they believed would be willing to participate in the survey.

Obtaining the Raw Data

The collection of data had a mixed success. The RMS were wanting to obtain responses from members of as wide a range of ethnic backgrounds as possible. They were also wanting to obtain responses from unqualified, as well as highly qualified, people.

There was a low rate of response from most ethnic groups. This could have been due to a number of factors. I believe the unwillingness of former refugee children with few, or no qualifications to respond to the questionnaire, would be a major factor. Other factors could include concerns about privacy, and not fully understanding the questionnaire. Stamped addressed envelopes, and personal visits made to some potential respondents, seemed to have little impact on the response rate. Somali community leaders put a lot of effort into obtain responses from their community. Unfortunately, many forms came back incomplete, or were filled in by children who had not yet left secondary school. The best set of data came from the former Polish refugee children who arrived in 1944. The questionnaires to this group were sent out with details of the 60th anniversary celebrations of their arrival in New Zealand. Of the 300 questionnaires sent out to the original refugee children, 86 were returned.

The Findings

The Polish Child Refugees

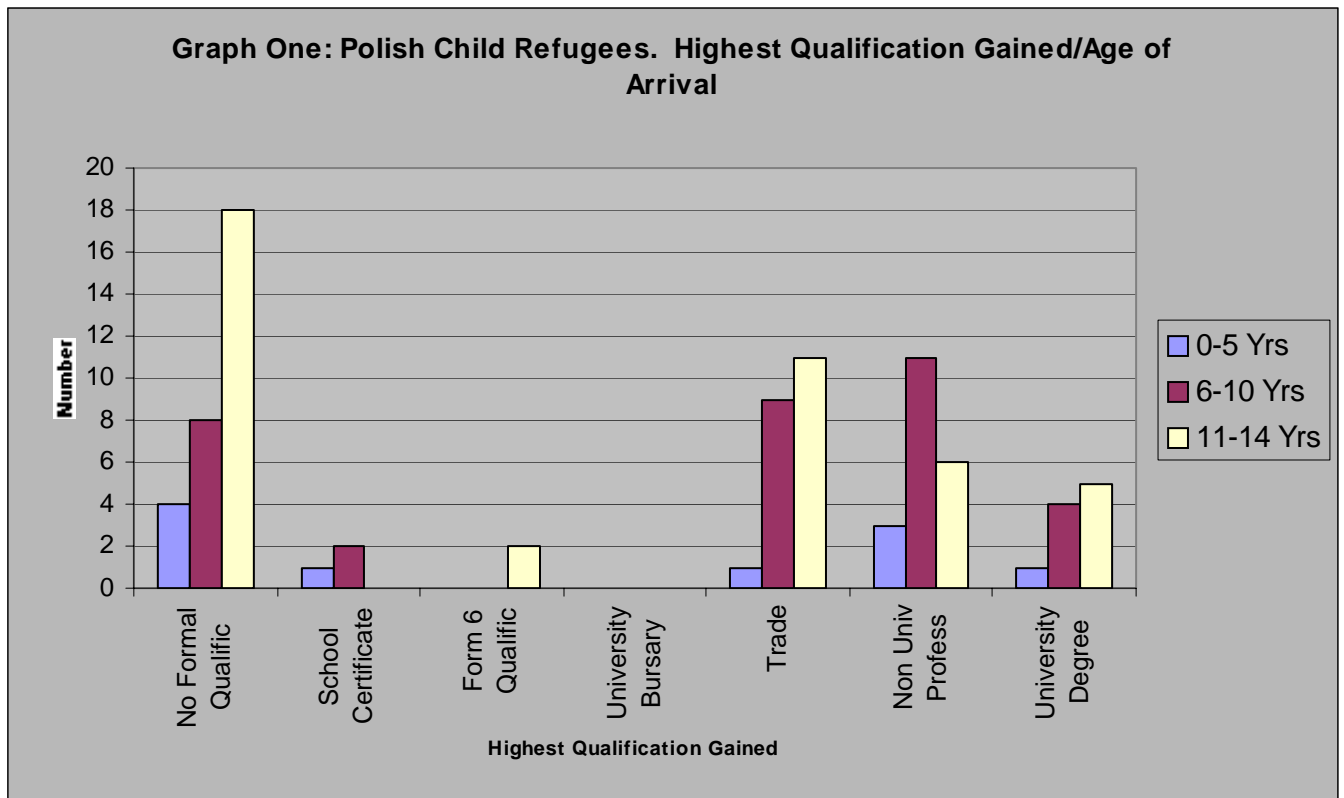
The refugee group with the highest number of questionnaire returns was the former Polish child refugees who arrived in New Zealand in 1944. This group were one of the most homogenous groups of refugees that New Zealand has resettled. There are a number of reasons for this. Everyone in this group had been forcibly removed from their homes in 1940 and 1941, prior to the German army's invasion of Russia. They had all spent up to two years in labour camps or on collective farms in various parts of the Soviet Union. All of them had spent at least two years without their natural parents. In most cases, this was because both parents had died. All of them had undergone a great deal of suffering during the journey through the southern Soviet Republics, before being taken to orphanages in Iran. It was in these orphanages, established in buildings leased by the Polish Government-In-Exile, that many of the Polish children received their first formal education. It was originally intended that these children would return to Poland once the war had finished. Because of this, the education the children received, both in the orphanages of Esfahan and the camp at Pahiataua, was designed to allow them to reintegrate into post war Polish society. This was the reason for the medium of instruction being Polish, with little emphasis being placed on the learning of English.

By the time the war ended, in 1945, most of these children had been displaced for four to five years. International agreements made by the Great Powers resulted in the Polish Government-In-Exile being no longer recognised. Poland became a Communist state, under the dominance of the Soviet Union. Because the majority of the children were without parents, the New Zealand Government, with the support of the New Zealand Catholic Church, offered to look after them. By this time the camp had a primary school, a secondary school and a trade school. Some of the older children were placed straight into jobs. Those who had completed Standard Six of the Polish Primary School, were sent to New Zealand Catholic Post-Primary schools. The younger girls were sent to the Polish Girls Hostel in Wellington and attended a New Zealand primary school. The primary school age boys initially attended local primary schools at Mangatainoka and Pahiataua, before being sent to Linton Military Camp, from where they attended the primary school run by the Marist brothers in Palmerston North for a term. From term two, 1949, they were accommodated at the Polish Boys Hostel in Hawera. The children who were sent to the various Roman Catholic secondary schools throughout New Zealand found this transition particularly difficult. Not only were they totally unprepared to receive instruction, and complete lessons, in the medium of English, but they were split up once again - from what they regarded as their Polish Children's Camp "family". Thrust among strangers, they felt very isolated in what was, to them, an alien culture.

Virtually all of the 86 former Polish child refugees who returned the questionnaire said they could not speak any English when they arrived in the New Zealand. Three said their English was poor. For the reasons outlined above, none had been given the opportunity to study English during their displacement period. As well as language difficulties, the Polish children lacked parental guidance and encouragement during a crucial period of their formative years. One of the former children reported that he could not remember an adult ever engaging in a conversation with him. During his secondary school years no one had ever told him why he should study. It never occurred to him that a better education would help him to earn more. Unemployment was virtually unknown in post war New Zealand. Jobs were plentiful and there was less emphasis, at

that time, on the value of remaining at secondary school for more than two or three years.

Despite all these difficulties, the results of the survey, displayed in Graph One, indicate that these former refugee Polish children have achieved some remarkable successes. As expected, a large number of those who were in the 11-14 year age group when they arrived in New Zealand, left school with no formal qualifications. Many of these people, however, went on to gain trade qualifications. Two who responded to the survey indicated they did not receive any secondary schooling at all. Despite this, one went on to become a qualified carpenter, and the other gained a New Zealand Railways engine driver's ticket. A very low percentage of respondents who were under 11 years of age when they arrived in New Zealand, ended up with no formal qualifications.



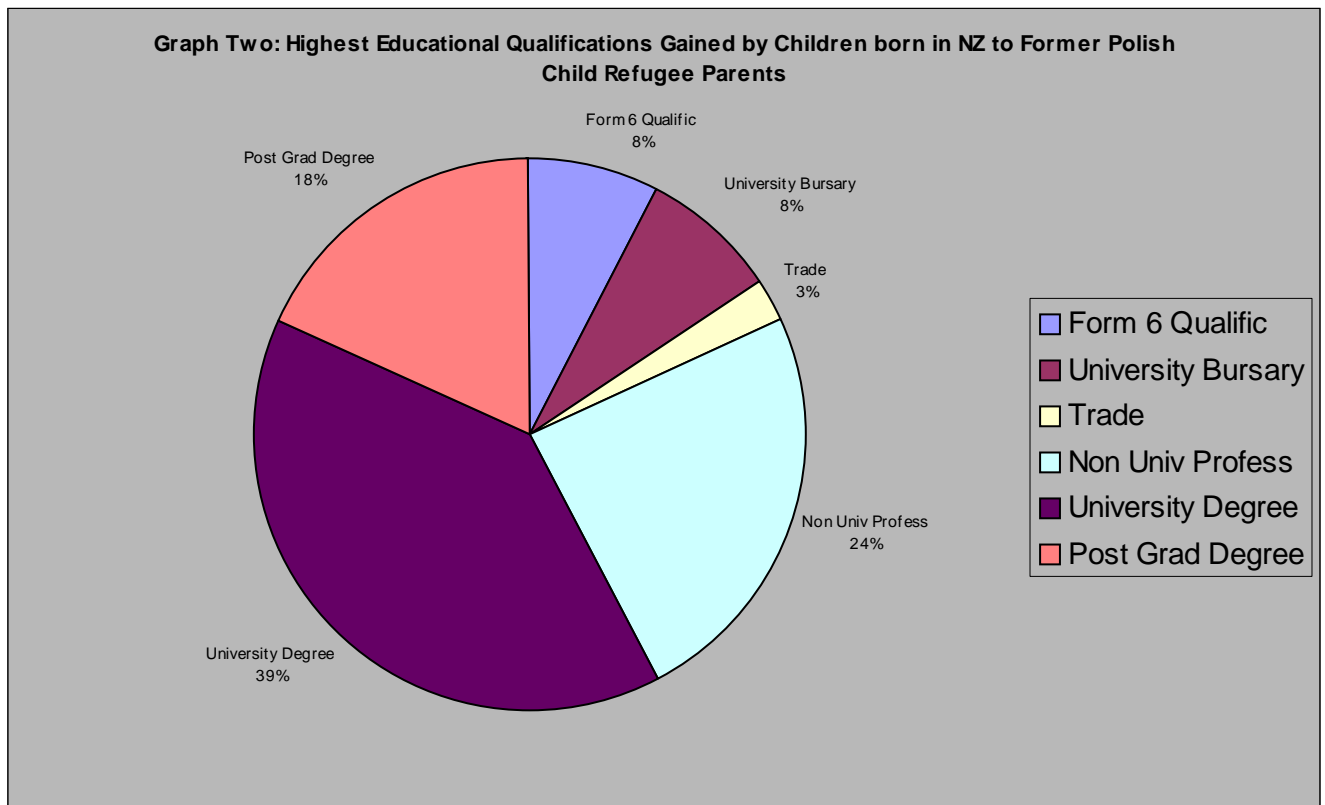
With the exception of those who gained no formal educational qualifications, there appears to be no particular pattern in relation to the age of arrival and the highest qualification gained. Considering the difficulties they had come through, a remarkable number of these children gained some form of tertiary qualification. Ten of the former Polish refugee children who returned the questionnaire indicated they gained university degrees. Surprisingly, of these ten, five were in the 11-14 year old age group on arrival in New Zealand. One former refugee said the Polish Government-In-Exile must be given credit here, for the way they made educational opportunities available to the children, in both Iran and New Zealand, under very difficult circumstances.

These former refugee children took up a variety of different occupations. The most popular choice was an occupation that led to a Trade Certificate. By far the majority of these were carpenters, but a variety of other trades such as mechanic, panel beater, electrician, plumber, sheet metalworker and boilermaker were also represented.

Another type of occupation that attracted large numbers of those who responded to the survey, was office and clerical work. Many of those who were involved in office work had gained qualifications from Business Colleges and Technical Institutes. Nursing was a popular choice of profession, with some taking on specialised nursing roles such as midwifery. Teaching was an equally popular choice, particularly for a number of the graduates. Bankers, farmers, accountants, social workers, insurance agents and a minister of religion were also represented amongst those who returned the questionnaire. Several reached managerial and executive positions in their careers. One, a 13-year-old with no English on arrival, gained a Postgraduate Diploma and became a Public Service Executive in International Affairs. Others established businesses of their own.

The Children of Former Polish Child Refugees

Graph Two displays the data collected from questionnaires received from the children born in New Zealand to former Polish child refugee parents. These returns also indicate high levels of educational and occupational achievement. All of them had gained some form of formal educational qualifications. Just over 75% of the group had completed some form of tertiary qualification, with over 50% achieving a university degree, and one third of these continuing their studies to gain a Postgraduate degree. Again, these people are represented in a variety of occupational groups - the computer industry, technician/engineers, teachers, consultants, office workers as well as self employed owners of businesses. One respondent has been an executive manager, and among the others were a librarian, a barrister solicitor, a technical writer and a dentist.



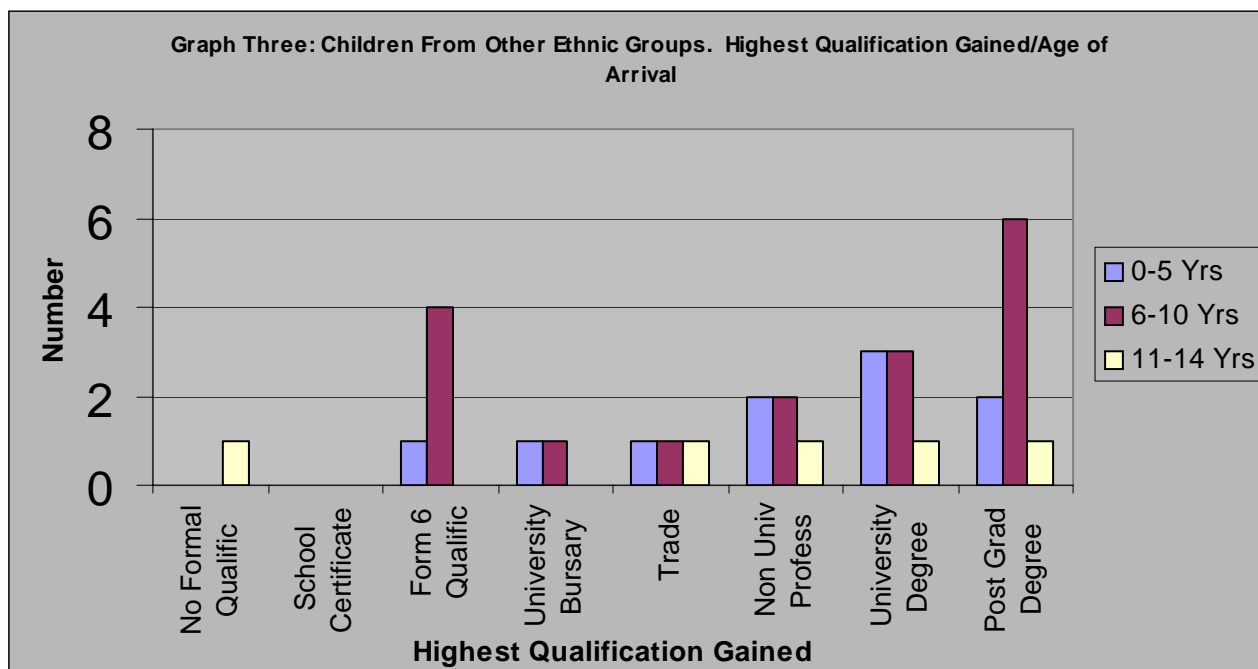
Child Refugees From Other Ethnic Groups

Responses to the questionnaire were received from people representing a variety of ethnic groups, including Vietnamese, Hungarians, Cambodians, Czechoslovakians, Somalis, Assyrians, Estonians and Russians. The earliest arrivals, the Estonians, came to New Zealand in the late 1940's. The most recent arrivals, the Somalis, were accepted for resettlement in the early 1990's. The majority of the responses came from children who arrived during the 1970's and 1980's.

Of the 120 responses I received to the questionnaire, only 32 came from non-Polish child refugees. This meant there were too few responses from any single ethnic group to draw any firm conclusions to the key questions in relation to a particular ethnic group. Because of this, I have taken the entire non-Polish child refugees as a single group.

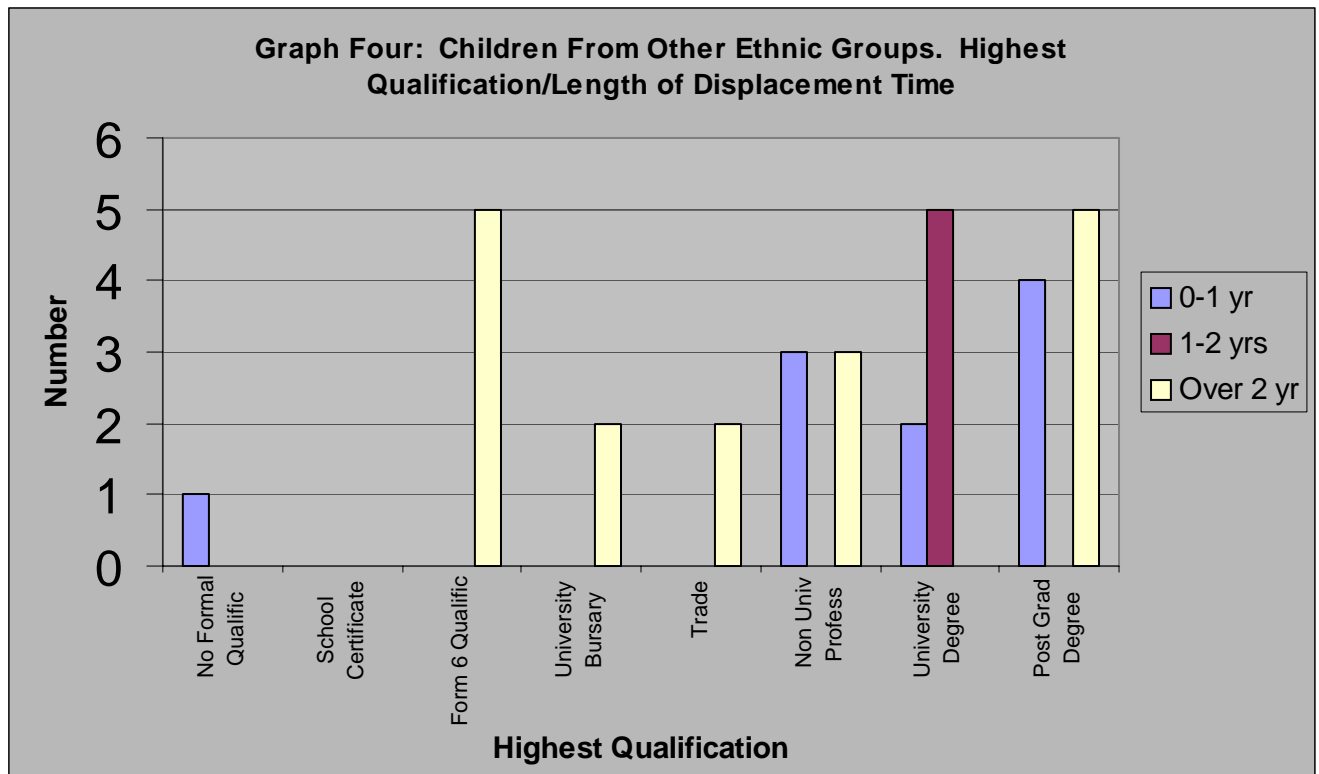
While there is no clear pattern reflected in the responses of this group, the data in Graph Three indicates a number of interesting factors.

Only one of the respondents had left school with no formal qualifications. This indicates to me that there was either a disinterest, or unwillingness for those who had no qualifications to fill the questionnaire. All of the other respondents had gained qualifications at Form 6 (Year 12) level, or better. Twenty four of the 32 who filled in the questionnaire had completed some form of tertiary qualification, 16 of them university degrees. Nine, over a quarter of those who responded, had gained postgraduate degrees. With over half of the respondents falling into the six to ten year age range on arrival, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions in relation to the effect age on arrival has on educational achievement. Four, of the five 11-14 year olds (on arrival in New Zealand), who replied to the questionnaire, gained some form of post secondary school qualification.



This is a considerable achievement for children who, arriving under stressful circumstances with nil, or poor, English, had only four or five years, at the most, to close the gap.

Graph Four show there was no clear indication of the length of displacement time having any particular effect on eventual educational achievement. Seventeen of the 32 respondents had been displaced for two, or more, years prior to their arrival in New Zealand. All of these children left school with some form of qualification - five with post graduate university degrees. The five respondents who were displaced for between one and two years all went on to gain a university degree. One of the children who had spent less than one year as a displaced person left school with no formal qualifications, the other nine in this same situation all gained a professional qualification.

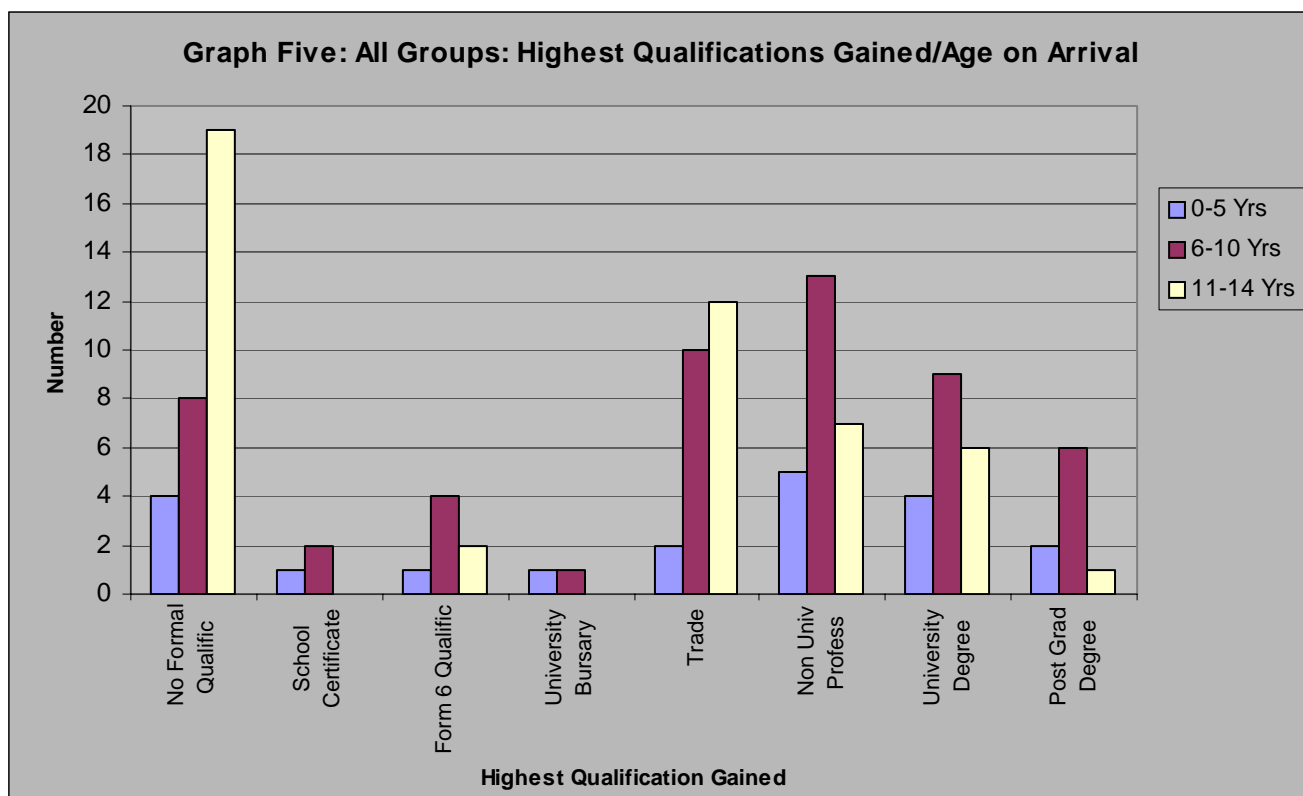


The main feature shared by virtually all the respondents was that very few them (six of the 32) were given the opportunity to study English during their displacement period. A second consistent feature was their overall lack of English ability on arrival. Only one of the 32 regarded themselves as being OK at English. All the rest said they had no English (24) or poor English (7). The children who arrived with no English ability went on to achieve very highly indeed. Fourteen of them gained tertiary qualifications. Of these, four managed to reach post graduate degree level. The seven who had poor English also achieved well, with all of them achieving a qualification, three of them a post graduate degree. From these respondents, there is no indication that lack of ability in English, on arrival in New Zealand, has hindered them educationally. That is not to say that others have not been penalised by a lack of English ability, but the responses show that it is not a major factor in future achievement.

The occupations taken up by these former refugee children are varied - medicine, dentistry, teaching, accountancy, architecture as well as sales and managerial positions.

Conclusions

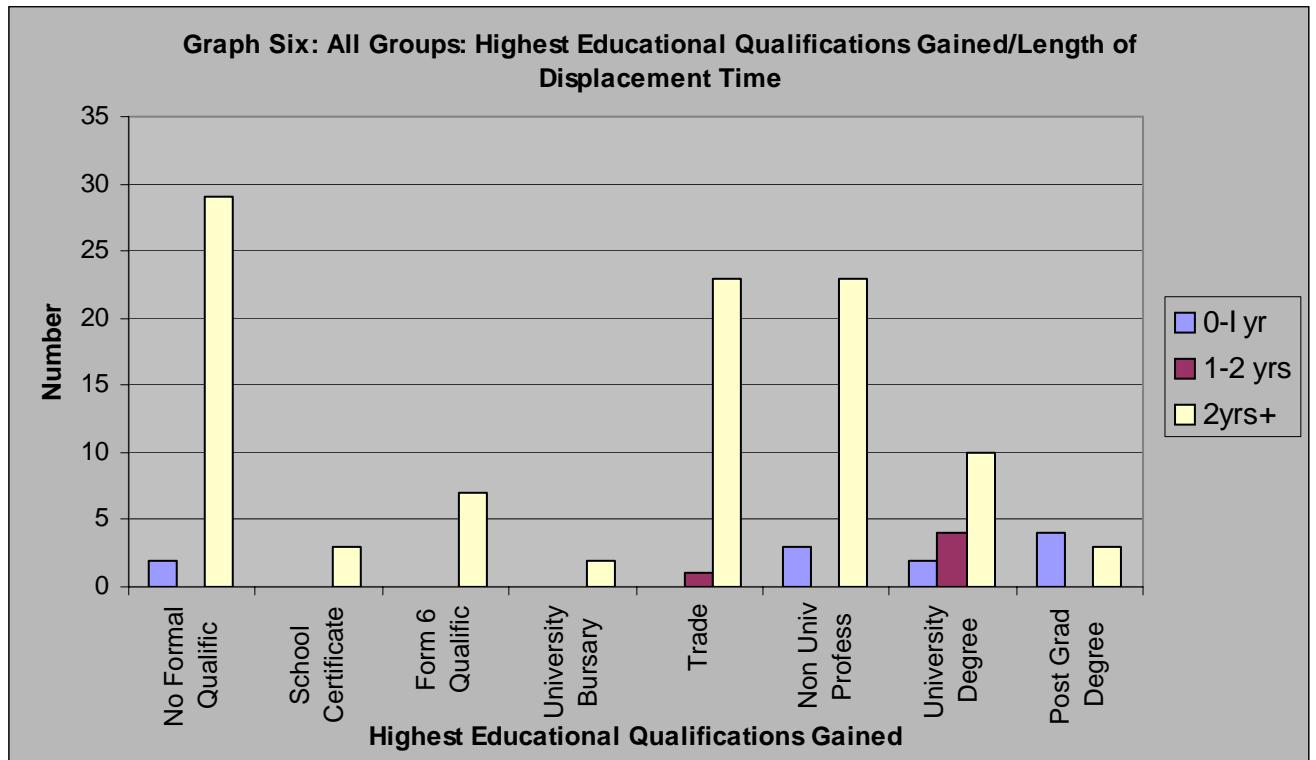
Age on arrival does appear to have a marked effect on later educational success. The highest number of those who left school with no formal qualifications arrived in New Zealand at the age of 11, or older. While this conclusion is obvious from Graph Five, it may not be a true reflection of the situation concerning refugees as a whole. Many of the respondents in this group came from the Polish child refugees who arrived in 1944. The social attitudes and economic climate of the time encouraged young people to leave school, and join the work force, at an early age. If the survey had gained more responses from arrivals in the 1970's and 1980's, the proportion of those who gained no formal qualifications would, I believe, be lower. This is because of different social attitudes, particularly concerning the importance of education, as well as the increased awareness of the needs of refugee children, in more recent decades.



It seems logical to assume that, compared with refugees who arrive in New Zealand at a very young age, those who arrive late in their childhood will have greater difficulty in gaining educational qualifications. However, this survey indicates that age is not an over-riding factor in determining whether, or not, a new arrival is going to enter the workplace with formal training and qualifications behind them.

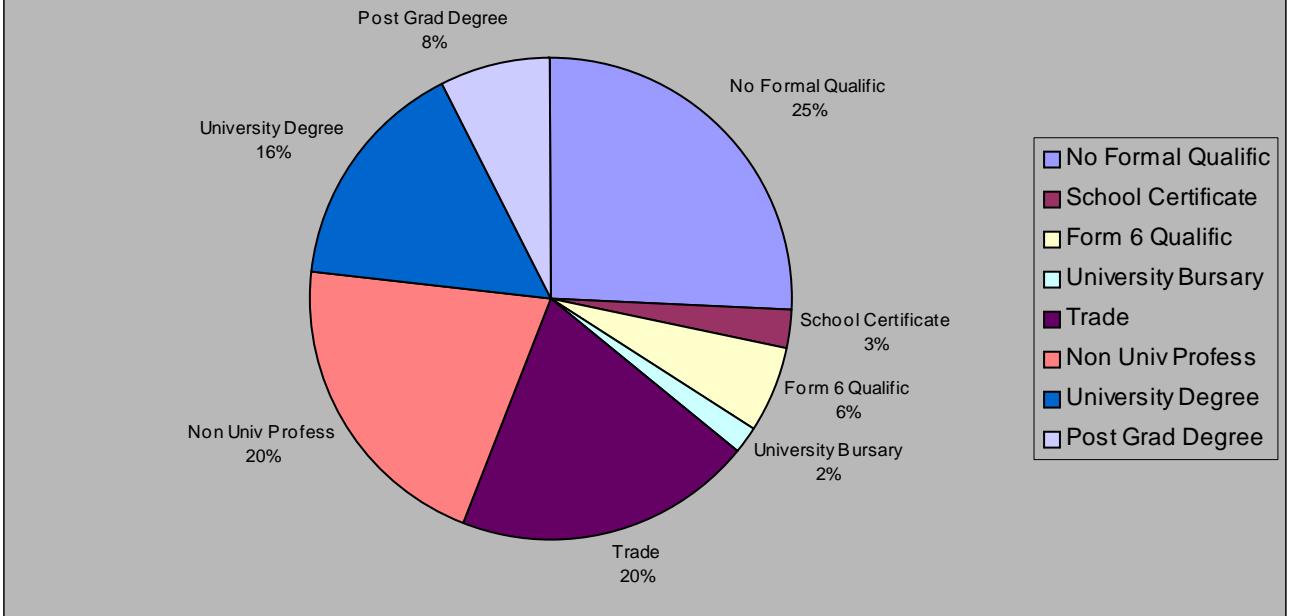
Graph Six reveals that an insignificant number of respondents were displaced for less than two years. Many were four or five years between the time they left their native country and their arrival in New Zealand. During this time very few received regular schooling, or had the opportunity to study English. Despite these handicaps, compounded by their inability to speak, or understand, English, these children have gone on to make an enormous contribution in all spheres of New Zealand society.

There is no indication, from this survey, that the length of displacement time has a marked effect on later educational achievement.



Graph Seven records the highest educational qualifications of all the former child refugees who responded to the survey questionnaire. It is significant that, of the 120 respondents, 77 had gained some form of qualification after leaving secondary school. All these children had to overcome considerable barriers to learning. The trauma of displacement, culture shock, language difficulties and financial constraints mean that every bit of educational success is hard won, through diligence and effort. Refugee parents are acutely aware that education is the way forward for their children and there is a high level of commitment given to learning.

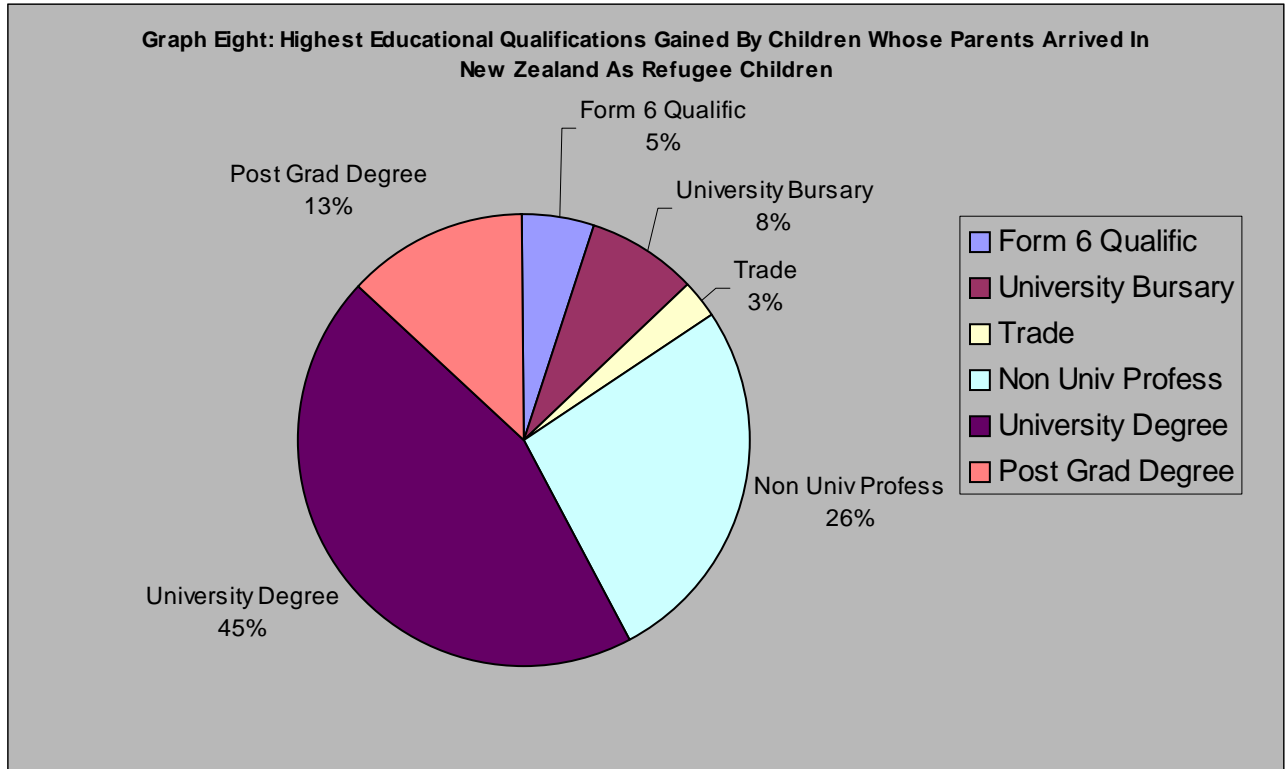
Graph Seven: Highest Educational Qualifications Achieved By Former Refugee Children Who Responded To The Survey



New Zealand has given sanctuary to refugees for over half a century. This survey has just given a glimpse of the total picture. It has relied on the voluntary responses of former refugee children and is likely to be biased in favour of the high achievers who were more likely to be interested in contributing, and more willing to respond. It is, however, clear that refugees have, and are presently, giving New Zealand society greater diversity and making a significant economic, social and cultural contribution to our country.

The Second Generation "Refugee Children".

There are now second and third generation New Zealanders whose parents arrived in this country as refugee children. Graph Eight shows that almost 90% of the 38 second-generation individuals who responded to the survey, have gained some form of tertiary qualification, with over half of them achieving university degrees.



Again, these results do not necessarily reflect a true cross section of the children of former child refugees. I believe that individuals who had achieved well in the education system were more likely to complete a questionnaire. That aside, it is clear that these children have fitted into New Zealand's education system, achieving at the highest levels. The diverse range of occupations taken up by these children, as mentioned earlier in the report, are an indication of the way the families have become an integral part of New Zealand society.