

Life Locked Up in Immigration Detention: An Exploratory Study of Education in Australian Refugee Prisons

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Abstract : Forced migration is at unprecedented levels globally, and many countries have implemented harsh policies regarding people seeking asylum. Australia legislates one of the harshest and most controversial responses in the world, sending any asylum seeker arriving by boat to indefinite offshore immigration detention. This includes children, families and unaccompanied minors. Asylum seekers and refugees are detained indefinitely by the Australian government in the Pacific Island countries of Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Global research on the impact of immigration detention has primarily focused on mental health and psychological concerns for both adults and children. Research into Australian immigration detention has largely overlooked the schooling and education of children detained in Nauru, despite refugee children spending more than five years in detention, a significant portion of a child's life. This research focused on the experience of education for children detained offshore in Nauru from 2013-2019. 21 qualitative interviews were conducted with children, parents and service providers between 2021-2022. Interviews explored experiences of schooling, power structures, and barriers and support to education. Findings show that a lack of belonging and lack of agency negatively affected school engagement. A sense of hopelessness and uncertainty also affected their motivation to attend school, with many children missing school for months and years. The research indicates that Australia's current policy of offshore detention has been detrimental to children's educational experiences.

Keywords : asylum seeker, children, education, immigration detention, policy, refugee, school

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