NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING BACKGROUND STUDENTS: A STUDY OF PROGRAMMES AND SUPPORT IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS

Epilogue
Extracts from one NESB student’s story, related on the following pages, are included in this report because they sum up well many of the points participants in the study raised when talking with us about their work with NESB students generally. Also, although the student in question and her family came to New Zealand under refugee status rather than by choice, a life situation which clearly can cause a great deal of distress, many of the feelings and experiences the student talks about are perhaps common to many non-English-speaking background students, whether new arrivals in New Zealand or whether New Zealand-born. Inherent in the student’s story are many challenges for all those in education and for everyone living in our increasingly multicultural society.
An NESB Student’s Experiences and Feelings about Coming to Live in New Zealand and About Becoming a Student in the New Zealand Education System

My family arrived in New Zealand in September 1980. We came as official refugees, brought by the New Zealand government. As we got off the plane at Auckland Airport, I felt the coldness of the wind on my eyes and on the skin of my face. I remember thinking, ‘Is it this cold in New Zealand?’

In the terminal, I saw a huge man with long black hair plaited down his back. I was shocked — I had never seen such a big person. I kept turning around to look at him and asking my mother why he was so big. It was also the first time I had seen so many European people together in one place. They were all rushing and seemed very busy. I don’t think they noticed us at all.

From the airport, we were taken in a bus to the Refugee Reception Centre at Mangere. ... We arrived at the Reception Centre, where we were to stay for the next four weeks ... I had a room to myself ... and I went there and sat down on the bed. I stayed there by myself until it was time to eat. That was how I spent most of my time at Mangere, staying in my room by myself. I didn’t go out very much; I didn’t talk to other people much. I didn’t really want to meet anyone. I felt very mixed about being there – half happy and half depressed.

... I sat in my room and looked out the window at the rain, and all the time I expected to see lots of people. But there wasn’t anyone. It really struck me that there was just no one around. New Zealand was going to be a very quiet country to live in.

... We had medical examinations and blood tests, and for the first time in my life I had a bath. In Phnom Penh we had always had showers. When I first saw the bath I thought, ‘What do they do with that container?’ Then I realised what it was for. At first, it felt like I was lying in a coffin, but I liked it. I could sit for hours in the hot water. The only trouble was the window above the bath; the glass was frosted so you couldn’t see through it, but I worried a lot that someone might be watching me.

... During the day there was a programme of English classes. We were divided up into different groups for these classes, and I was in a group of mostly teenagers. The teacher was very

1 The student’s story related on this and the following few pages is an extract from Borany’s Story, by Borany Kanal and Adrienne Jansen, published by Learning Media, Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand, 1991, pp. 76-96. Borany and her family came to New Zealand as refugees from Cambodia as a result of the political upheaval under the harsh Pol Pot regime. Learning Media also published accompanying notes for teachers (Teachers’ Notes – Borany’s Story (1991)) which gave ideas for class discussion on some of the issues arising from Borany’s story. For example, the notes suggest discussing ‘the events [which lead] to people [leaving] their country’, ‘the ideas and customs that new settlers bring with them’, and ‘how people cope with change’.
She spoke French, and she realised that I could understand some French. One day, she was trying to explain to the class, in English, that we had to go to the language lab for listening practice. No one could understand; they just sat and looked at her. Then she explained to us in French what we had to do, and I was able to explain this to the rest of the class in Khmer. This made me feel good. All the time I heard things in English that I couldn’t understand, and here I had been able to understand and translate for everyone else.

Most days, after lunch, we had a talk about what it was like living in New Zealand — how to get a driver’s license, all about family doctors, and so on. I didn’t take much notice, because I wasn’t very interested. It all seemed far away to me. Once, a group of Maori came and talked to us. I hadn’t really understood that there were Maori and Pacific Islanders in New Zealand, as well as Europeans. They explained that there were Maori in New Zealand before the Europeans came. Then they did a haka. I was sitting right at the front, and when I suddenly heard the sound of their feet on the floor and their voices shouting, I got such a fright. It sounded so violent. When they had finished, they explained what the haka was about, and then I didn’t feel so afraid.

Later, we went to a marae. The people there sang to us, to welcome us, and one person in our group sang a song in Khmer to reply. I thought he had a lot of courage. Then we had to touch noses with the people who welcomed us. I found that difficult, because in Asian cultures it’s very rude to touch another person’s head.

... Sometimes I’ve wondered why I stayed in my room so much. I think it was because all of the time I was at Mangere I felt embarrassed. I was embarrassed about being a refugee. Even when people didn’t pay any attention to me I still felt embarrassed. It’s hard to explain, but I think it’s to do with being different. For a start, you come here, to a new country, and you don’t pay for your travel. Other people pay for their tickets, but if you’re a refugee, you don’t. And people give things to you all the time. Everyone is very kind and very helpful. But it makes you feel different, not normal.

It was the same when we left to come to Wellington. I was really looking forward to coming to Wellington, but I was embarrassed all the time about being a refugee. It was exciting to be going to a new place, but I didn’t know how I would cope.

The flight from Auckland to Wellington was cloudy and very windy. ... On that trip I remember thinking that if only I knew English, I would feel free. Then I would love travelling, especially by plane.

Coming to Wellington was like the beginning of our permanent life in New Zealand. When people come to this country as refugees, they have a sponsoring group which helps them to
get work and a house, and generally find out what they need to know. Our sponsors were a church in Porirua, about twenty kilometres out of Wellington, so we knew we would be living in that area.

... We arrived at a house in Porirua, and our sponsor took us all inside. I thought that it must be his house, because it all looked so nice. There was even a bowl of apples on the table. It was only after he had left that I realised that the house was for us. I couldn’t believe it. It was a proper house!

For the first week in our new home we mostly stayed inside. We spent a lot of time listening to the radio, particularly short-wave from Australia and France. We were just so tired that we didn’t want to go anywhere. Several people from our sponsoring church came to visit us, and one brought us some firewood. This was very useful, because, although we had a heater, we were still very cold. Our sponsors also came and took us out a few times; we went to the beach, and once to the shops when they were open late at night. There were a lot of Maori and Pacific Islanders shopping, and, because they looked a lot like Asians to me, I felt like going up to them and talking in Khmer. In some ways, they made me feel more at home.

During that first week I thought a lot about starting school. I worried about getting on with the other kids and my lack of English. I didn’t know how I would cope. I got out the English notes I had been given at Mangere, and practised phrases like “Hello” and “How are you?” so that I would have something to say. Then at the beginning of the next week, I started primary school.

I hadn’t been to school for six years, and that first day I felt very unhappy. I saw straight away that I was older than the other children. I was twelve, but only in standard 4. When the other kids found out my age, they teased me about it. What made it harder for me was that most of the other Cambodians who had come to Wellington at the same time were together at Wellington High School. There were lots of Asian students at Wellington High, and my friends would ring me up and tell me about all the Cambodian kids in their class, and how they could speak Khmer to each other.

I didn’t even have my brother Ramany with me, because he had gone to college. When I thought about all the people together in Wellington High, I felt very sad. I really wanted to go there, but it was too far away. You had to catch a train and a bus to go there. It was impossible.

Although I began to get on better with other children as time went on, I still found the language very difficult. There was no more help in English, so I just had to try to do what the others were doing. I also had a lot of trouble with maths, particularly fractions; I had missed so much in my six years away from school. In the end, someone from our church helped me.
understand what a fraction was by cutting an apple in half, and then into quarters. After that, it seemed easy.

There were some things that I really enjoyed about being at school. Most kids belonged to the Polynesian Club, so I joined too. We learnt songs in Maori and Samoan, and in English. I liked this because I found the songs very easy to pick up. Once we were told that there was going to be a performance, but when I saw what we were going to wear, the tops with nothing over the shoulders I was shocked. We never wore anything like that in Cambodia. We would always wear a blouse. To me, wearing that costume was like having no clothes on. In the end, I said I didn’t want to be in the performance, but I didn’t say why.

One of the best things that happened to me in those first weeks was going camping in the Marlborough Sounds. I went with a teacher and some other girls from the church that had sponsored our family. We went across to Picton on the ferry at night and then by launch the next morning to another part of the South Island. At Picton, the teacher asked me what I would like for breakfast but I just didn’t know how to tell her what I wanted. In the end, I pointed at some food that someone else was eating and said I would like one of those. I ended up having a pie for breakfast!

Over the next few days, we slept in tents, collected stones and shells, and swam in the sea. I had never seen water so clear and blue. Once, when some of the others were diving for paua, I tried swimming with a snorkel and flippers. It was fun!

Some things on that trip brought back strong memories of Cambodia. One night we made a fire and cooked potatoes in it. That reminded me of the last time I had sat outside with a fire, with my grandmother in Pursat. One day we went for a bush walk. It was uphill on a winding track, and it seemed strange to me that people did this just for fun. On that walk I remembered crossing the border, from Cambodia into Thailand.

That trip was very special to me. Although I felt shy and didn’t understand what people were saying a lot of the time, the people were happy and laughed and joked a lot. It didn’t really matter that I didn’t understand.

Back in Porirua, I often found it hard to believe that we were really here. It was as if one moment I had been in Cambodia and the next I was in New Zealand. A lot was happening at that time. Ramany and I went to school, my mother was home with ... my baby brother, and my father had started a new job. In Cambodia he had been at university, but now he was working at a factory. Some days, when he had to wait a long time for the bus, he would arrive home very cold and wet. It was especially hard for him.
... At the beginning of the next year, 1981, I went to high school, straight from standard four into form three. To begin with, I felt very alone and cried a lot, and there were some girls there who didn’t like me. Once, one of them came up to me and said, “I hate your guts”. At the time I didn’t know what this meant, but when I found out, I felt very bad. But, even though there were these problems, I think going to high school was the best thing for me to do at that time. The work was hard, but I liked the school, and I liked being with people my own age. Somehow, everything was less of a problem than at primary school. Some of my subjects were difficult because of the language involved, and my poor English meant that I couldn’t do so well in French. Even though I could understand the French, my English wasn’t good enough for me to do translation! It wasn’t easy for my parents to help me, either. They really wanted us to have a good education, but they didn’t know enough about the system or the subjects to give me much help. I felt very much on my own, and that it was up to me to do as well as I could.

I found that there were a lot of differences between schools in New Zealand and Cambodia. In Cambodia, everyone has to show respect for their teacher. They sit up straight and fold their arms when they are listening, and they are polite. To begin with, I thought that students in New Zealand were noisy, and sometimes seemed rude. Then I realised that it seemed to be up to the individual — some wasted time, others worked hard and did well. I decided that I wanted to do well, and that my lack of English was no excuse, but I was still afraid to ask questions. I was afraid that my teacher wouldn’t understand me.

More than anything at that time, I felt different from everyone else. I didn’t want anyone to know that I was a refugee. I didn’t even want anyone to know that I was Cambodian, because I thought that people would be aware of what had happened in Cambodia, and what had happened to us.

Once we had a party for all the French classes, and we had pastries and other French food. One of the teachers said to me, “Borany, you haven’t had food like this for a long time, have you?” I was very upset by that remark. I thought she was saying that I hadn’t had good food for a long time, because we became so poor during the Pol Pot regime, and since then. Later, I realised that I might not have understood what she was saying. Perhaps she was being understanding. Maybe she was saying that she knew we had eaten French food in Cambodia. However, I didn’t take it like that at the time. I often judged what people said to me in the wrong way.

Another time, a teacher said to me, “You’re not the only one here who is a refugee. Some of the teachers are refugees, too”. I found that there was one teacher at the school who had come from Vietnam during the war, and another, I think, who had come from Europe a long
time ago. Those words really encouraged me. They made me feel so much better and more confident.

I made a lot of friends at college, and I often compared myself to them because I wanted to do as well as everyone else. But my English kept holding me back. I didn’t pass University Entrance and I had to repeat my sixth form year. That made me feel terrible and as though it had all been a waste of time. It made me want to run away from school. But I did go back to the sixth form, and from then I went on to university.

The first eleven years of my life I lived in Cambodia, and then for nearly one year in a refugee camp in Thailand. Now, I have lived in New Zealand since 1980.

... Would I go back to Cambodia if I had the chance? It’s hard to answer that question. I’ve lived almost as long in New Zealand as I lived in Cambodia. My everyday life here is very much in the Western way, and everything has changed in Cambodia. I could never go back to my old life there, because that life doesn’t exist any more. It would be very hard for me to go back there to live, but I really want to go back to visit.

Even though I don’t want to live in Cambodia again, it’s very important for me to keep my culture. It’s important for everyone to have a culture that they feel they belong in. In the Cambodian culture, the language is especially important. We always speak Khmer at home, but I don’t speak it in any educated way. Often, other people correct me when I speak — usually older people, but sometimes even my friends — and sometimes we get letters from Cambodia, but I can’t read them. One day, I would like to be able to read and write Khmer much better than I do now.

Festivals are important too. ... All of [the] traditional and cultural things are important for two reasons. For us, they are a way of keeping our traditions alive in this new country, but they are also important as a way of showing New Zealanders the sort of culture that Cambodia has. Not many New Zealanders know a lot about Cambodia.

I came to New Zealand as a Cambodian, but I also came as a refugee, and that’s not easy. I think that most New Zealanders believe that Asian refugees know very little about Western ways. They think that refugees come from under-developed countries that are primitive and isolated from the rest of the world. I don’t think they realise that many refugees have quite sophisticated backgrounds, and a lot of education. They come to New Zealand because of political situations, because of the loss of their country, and not from choice.

... Now, in my everyday life here, I don’t think much about Cambodia, but it’s always inside me. Sometimes I meet people who are very interested in Cambodia, and want to talk with
me about it to find out more. Those people make me feel proud, because when you come to a new country, the longer you stay, the more you feel as though you’ve lost everything. You’ve already lost the country, and now you’re losing the language and the culture. The people who want to know about those things, the people who care about what I’ve left behind, they make me feel like the person I really am.