



# CaDDANZ

Capturing the Diversity Dividend  
of Aotearoa/New Zealand

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## INTERNATIONAL ESOL STUDENTS' SENSE OF SCHOOL BELONGING, INCLUSION, AND WELLBEING

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### Introduction

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, and especially in the country's urban centres, increasing immigration and the expansion of international education programmes have introduced greater linguistic and ethno-national diversity in many secondary schools. In 2016, nearly 20,000 fee-paying international students attended New Zealand primary and secondary schools, and more than 102,000 international students were enrolled at universities or other education institutions. The majority of these students arrived from diverse Asian countries (with students from China and India accounting for more than half of the total number in 2016), complemented by smaller numbers from a variety of countries across the globe.

In the context of student mobility, important questions to ask are what drives this mobility, how the transition to a new society and a new education system affects international students, and how education providers adapt to an increase in the ethno-cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of the student population.

Under the umbrella of the CaDDANZ research programme, we examined such questions in a study with international students who were also ESOL students (English for speakers of other languages) at a New Zealand secondary school. We were particularly interested in finding out how school practices (such as policies that regulate school life, discourses about diversity at school, as well as peer and student-teacher interactions) shaped these students' sense of belonging, inclusion and wellbeing.

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## Methodology

In order to explore the above objective, we designed a qualitative project that combined a number of methods to investigate different facets of school policies and practices and student experiences.

In the first phase of the project, all international ESOL students (n=142) were invited to fill in a network questionnaire and a story template. The questionnaire and story contained a number of questions designed to gather demographic information about the students' migration and education history. Further, the network questionnaire asked students to list their closest friends at school, as well as interests or characteristics and activities they shared with these friends. The story template consisted of five open questions prompting students to write short paragraphs about their experience of being a student at the school.

The second phase of the study consisted of ethnographic observations of students in selected classes and during breaks. Eight students from across Years 9 to 13 were drawn from the pool of international ESOL students who had participated in the first phase and invited to work closely with the researchers for the duration of the term. In order to gain a better understanding of students' day-to-day practices and interactions with teachers and peers, we observed each student approximately once a week for two successive periods (one ESOL class and one 'mainstream' class) and accompanied the students during adjoining breaks. We video-recorded classes and took field notes of observations related to the classroom environment, student participation as well as peer and student-teacher interactions.

In the third and final phase, we conducted individual interviews with the eight students we observed as well as focus group discussions with these students and their close friends. In total, 30 students took part in the focus group sessions. In addition, we interviewed nine teachers whose classes we had observed and two staff who work within the International Department. This department consists of a director, international advisors and a homestay manager who are in charge of international student recruitment and pastoral care. The teacher interviews covered teachers' practices of addressing diversity in the classroom, perceptions of school policies and practices of inclusion, and student and staff wellbeing.

## A lack of cross-cultural friendships affects international ESOL students' sense of belonging and wellbeing

Mutual peer support and friendship were fundamental to international ESOL students' sense of school belonging, inclusion and wellbeing. Having 'real friends' who could be relied upon for support and help was extremely important to them, especially in the absence of family. The study showed that all students we spoke to had developed close friendships with fellow international ESOL students, yet remained largely unsuccessful in connecting to domestic students<sup>1</sup> in the same way. Students consistently reported feelings of frustration because their efforts at developing friendships were not reciprocated by domestic students. As one student put it, "they don't give me much welcome feeling." This lack of friendships with domestic students most prominently contributed to a sense of exclusion amongst international ESOL students.

- *We all have Kiwi friends but when we finish school and when we out, just we Chinese.*
- *We can't with Kiwi friends. The activity not belong to us maybe.*
- *So the Kiwi friend, we actually just allowed to talk with in school but after the school, if they meet me they just say 'hi [name]'. But in the weekend if they have some activities they will not call the Asian student to join with them.*
- *Even we don't have their Facebook so I think you're like classmates, you're not like really close friends. (Student Focus Group)*

The research revealed some divergence between student and teacher perceptions of peer interactions. While the international ESOL students consistently stressed that they tried hard to initiate contact with domestic students, teachers by and large felt that international ESOL students were isolating themselves in the international student area of the school and needed to be more outgoing.



## Positive student-teacher relationships promote a sense of inclusion and belonging

Equally important to students' sense of school belonging, inclusion and wellbeing was a supportive learning environment and strong teacher-student relations. Students overwhelmingly reported very positive impressions of teacher attitudes towards them. They specifically appreciated day-to-day practical help (especially when first settling into the new environment) and also valued their experience of a different learning environment that afforded them the opportunity to develop new skills. Overall, a sense that teachers cared about them as individuals along with high expectations for academic and personal development on the part of teachers were integral to students' wellbeing.

*"They really want me to do my best and maybe they will feel happy when I achieve my goal." (Student)*

The students' emphasis on the importance of positive teacher-student relations was matched by teachers' views. Participating teachers stated that their own role in fostering strong and trusting teacher-student relationships were central to achieving the school's aims to build and maintain a sense of community and belonging and ensure student wellbeing. They particularly emphasised their responsibilities for providing pastoral care alongside promoting academic achievement.

*"If you separate the role of a teacher and the pastoral side of things you run the risk of the teacher seeing themselves as not being responsible for pastoral care which they absolutely are." (Teacher)*

However, in this context, the study revealed great concern amongst teachers that their ability to develop durable relationships with their students was limited by the school's high-stress environment which resulted from a strong emphasis on maintaining academic achievement. Despite the school's explicit efforts to promote staff wellbeing, high workloads resulted in time constraints, low morale, and subsequently a high rate of staff turnover.

## Linguistic diversity is met with monolingual practices

The school's practices regarding linguistic difference, and especially its ESOL class system, substantially detracted from international ESOL students' sense of school belonging, inclusion, and wellbeing. In the context of exploring the place of diversity in the school's everyday practices, linguistic diversity was a key theme for both students and teachers, with widely diverging views between the two. All students we spoke to were dissatisfied with the school's ESOL system. Being separated from the mainstream was seen as a key obstacle to making friends with domestic students, and also as impeding their academic potential. Students felt that separation slowed the process of learning English, reduced their access to mainstream courses, and increased the likelihood of being placed in a lower stream.

*"I think we shouldn't have ESOL class. I think we can choose with other students together to class, not just Asian students at a class. It's not very good to practice English I think." (Student)*

Students also reported occasional conflicts that arose from being discouraged to speak their home languages in the classroom. Their perception that teachers routinely insisted on using the English language only was corroborated in classroom observations. While teachers were obviously deeply motivated to help students learn English, this endeavour was often underscored by a monolingual approach that saw students' home languages as a barrier to learning English and to academic achievement. In classes and during breaks, we noticed several examples of an approach that favoured monolingualism over multilingualism. Students' native languages were commonly seen as something that needed to be 'managed'.

*"I found it quite difficult to manage that, them not talking in their own language and taking part in English which is the reason they're here, it's to improve their English but it's a battle to get them to speak in English." (Teacher)*



## Linguistic diversity is met with monolingual practices - Continued

By contrast, the students themselves attributed their difficulties to more structural factors, namely the school's large number of international ESOL students (of the same linguistic background), and the ESOL class system which reduced their opportunities to mix with domestic students.

*"I think some of them do really, really well and others will just stay over by the International Office and stay with the other international students whereas others will happily mix more freely." (Teacher)*

Analysis shows that two factors impacted teacher attitudes and practices around managing students' use of their home languages. Firstly, international ESOL students were primarily defined as 'English language learners'. There are two problems with this definition. For one, it does not capture the complexity of reasons for academic mobility that guides the students' decisions to study at a New Zealand school. Secondly, it serves as justification for a lack of responsiveness to increasing multilingualism in the class room.

The school also explicitly categorises ESOL students as priority learners, positioning them as one 'target group' alongside Māori and Pasifika students and students with special learning needs. Despite good intentions, there is a risk of framing ESOL students as deficient rather than as students who bring additional knowledge to the classroom. Additional language learning is framed as a hardship and students are perceived as in need of 'help' with learning English.

Secondly, data revealed that teachers felt underprepared for linguistic diversity in the classroom. Teachers found linguistic diversity in the classroom challenging and described students' use of home languages as something that needed to be managed or even proscribed. This perspective was largely based on the assumption that the use of home languages delayed progress in gaining English language proficiency but also resulted from a fear of losing control when students could not be understood. Rather than adjusting to multilingualism in the classroom, teachers endorsed the ESOL class system as a necessity that assists students with reaching a level of English language proficiency that will allow them to successfully participate in mainstream subject courses.

*"I found that quite surprising, that there would be a student here who wouldn't be able to understand me very well and I wouldn't be able to understand him. I was like how am I going to help here?" (Teacher)*

## Summary

This study has shown that the international ESOL students at the participating school had very clear ideas about what facilitated their sense of school belonging, inclusion, and wellbeing and what subtracted from it. Crucially, students' sense of belonging suffered when they were excluded – either from mainstream classes or from socialising with their 'Kiwi' peers. These instances of exclusion appeared to be the result of an expectation that international ESOL students are responsible for doing the work of integration.

However, one key element of responding to diversity needs to be reciprocity, that is, working towards addressing ESOL students' needs in particular, and towards international student inclusion more generally, requires a whole-of-school approach. All students, staff and management need to be invested in the benefits of mainstreaming and normalising diversity, including multilingualism. Actively promoting the inclusion of various forms of difference and making it a normal and valued part of the school has the potential to develop international capabilities of all students.

Regarding peer-relations, there are opportunities to actively foster community-building through classroom and school-wide activities that bring students of different backgrounds together and that help to build and sustain new relationships. With respect to linguistic diversity, there are real opportunities to implement innovative approaches that can help to overcome outmoded monolingual practices. Especially in Anglophone contexts such as Aotearoa/New Zealand where many young people are only fluent in one language, it is important that multilingualism is actively promoted.