

Kiwi Friends? The Expectations and Experiences of International Students at a Secondary School in Auckland, New Zealand, of Social Relationships with Local Domestic Students and of 'Buddies' or 'Peer Pairing'

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Abstract

A study of 69 international students, 37 of whom had been peer-paired with a 'buddy', finds that they are generally welcoming of interventions to facilitate social interaction with local students at the school. The students valued many aspects of peer support and most reported having established friendships with both local and international students. There were indications that students who benefitted from the support of a 'buddy' had a more positive response to the school staff and environment. The survey results highlighted the importance of particular aspects of peer support, such as having someone to sit with at school lunchtime. These findings contribute to a background of research evidence describing the benefits of assisting international students to integrate with local students and the wider community.

Key Words

International students, social relationships, friendships, buddies, peer pairing, local students.

Introduction

International students currently make up a significant part of the New Zealand education sector, benefitting national and local economies and contributing in less easily identifiable ways to local communities, groups and individuals. In 2009 there were 9,529 students studying at primary & secondary schools in New Zealand and almost 50% of these students were in Auckland (Education Counts 2009).

In 2001 the Ministry of Education commissioned a review of literature and published research on international education in New Zealand (Ward 2001). The resulting publication identified the nature of interaction and relationships between international and domestic students as a key area of relevance and interest. The studies reviewed by Ward suggested that the presence of international students in an educational establishment, even in relatively large numbers, was insufficient in itself to promote intercultural relations. International students expected their institutions to facilitate and initiate more interactions (Ward 2001).

A study of a peer pairing program (Westwood & Barker 1990) at Universities in Australia and Canada compared social adjustment between international students who had participated in the program with those who had not. The researchers found higher achievement rates and lower drop-out rates for students who had been matched with local students during their first year. A later paper jointly published by Westwood & Quintrell (1994) reported the benefits of a peer pairing program between newly arrived international students and host national students on international students' first year experience at university. Those international students who had participated were more likely also to choose positive descriptors of their year, to have used services on campus and to report progress in language fluency.

The University of Adelaide Overseas Students Association reported in 2005 that 'the opportunity to interact, and make friends with Australian students is one of the reasons that international students choose to study in Australia'. However, the survey concluded that international and local students were spending most of their time with students from their own group despite their desire for increased

interaction with students from other groups and thought that The University had a role to play in facilitating this.

Brown & Daly (2004), suggested that friendships formed in the classroom may lead to future global business relationships, making the interactions and attitudes between overseas and domestic students particularly relevant. Their study found that the attitudes of local and international students towards each other were largely positive, suggesting that other factors were limiting the development of social interactions, and highlighting scope for research into interventionist strategies to facilitate and encourage this.

More recently, Betty Leask of the University of South Australia has argued that the development of what she terms 'intercultural competencies' in students requires 'a campus environment and culture that obviously motivates and rewards interaction between international and home students in and out of the classroom' (Leask 2009).

Alison Owens and Susan Loomes of the International Education Research Centre in Sydney, Australia, reported the results of a survey of 446 international students who had the opportunity to benefit from a two year focus on improving social integration for 5000 international students (Owens & Loomes 2010). Events attended by international students were ranked in order of frequency and the students were asked how the activities had added value to their experience. The most frequent response was that they had helped them to make new friends. When asked who had best helped them adapt to their life as a student in Australia, the students most frequently nominated their friends. Students also requested more organised activities (particularly off-campus), expressing a desire to engage more with the local community.

Most New Zealand research on interaction between international and domestic students has been conducted in tertiary institutions, with only a few published studies from research in schools. In 2001 Terri Hu McFedries published findings from an investigation of living situations of non-English-speaking background Asian full fee paying secondary school students boarding with host families in Christchurch, New Zealand. The research suggested that interactions between these international students and the local students and community were 'infrequent' and that many of the students surveyed did not have a good relationship with the 'host culture and its people' (McFedries 2001).

In 2009 a report was published from research into the living conditions of Chinese students in New Zealand. Max Pu surveyed 122 students across nine institutions ranging from public universities to private education institutes and language schools. The study included questions relating to the students' social lives. Pu's findings reported that 'social networks' represented one of 'five key factors' which influenced the students' satisfaction and perception about the service quality of New Zealand export education (Pu 2009).

From reviewing these studies there appeared to be a need for more research into the experiences of social integration between international and local students at secondary education level in New Zealand. It was hoped that a small project in this area could add to the findings from other New Zealand studies and aim to provide some useful feedback for developing interventions for students in the school environment.

Background

The 'Kiwi Friends' project was completed in 2010 and formed part of the Postgraduate Diploma in Social Science Research Methods at the University of Auckland. The postgraduate student researcher has been working at Macleans College since 2006, as part of a team supporting international students at the school. The school aims to allocate a 'buddy' to all new students, but this aspect of peer support for international students had not previously been reviewed in any systematic way.

Setting

Macleans College is a large, publicly funded, co-educational secondary school located in the pleasant coastal suburb of Howick in Auckland. The school roll of about 2,600 students includes around 250 - 300 full fee paying international students. International students enrolled at Macleans may live either

with their natural parent, a relative/friend of their family or with a local host family or 'homestay' as a paid arrangement, organised for them by the school.

Consultation

At the planning stage of the project, consultation meetings were set up with representatives from each of three key contributors: the school's Student Advisory Service, the Intercultural Club, and the International Student cohort. The resulting feedback was used to develop and modify the questionnaire, and a new section was added for participants to add their own comments with regard to aspects of friendship and peer support.

The students who were consulted appeared to be genuinely interested in the research topic and keen to participate and expressed views that the subject of friendships was important and relevant to them, and was a good topic for a survey in the school. The feedback given on the questionnaire was that it was not difficult to understand or complete.

Ethics approval for the project was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, reference 2010/493, for a period of three years. In order to meet the requirements for ethics approval, most of the demographic questions which were part of the original pilot questionnaire had to be removed or amended in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. This included removal of the questions regarding students' country of origin and living arrangements, and a re-design of the questions asking students to indicate how long they had been studying in New Zealand and which categories of family members (if any) they had living in the country. The number of response options were reduced by combining them into broader categories, to eliminate any possible combination of demographic responses which could potentially enable identification of an individual participant.

Aims

The study aimed to describe some of the attitudes, expectations and experiences of international fee paying students with regard to social interaction with other students at the school. The survey questionnaire was designed to gather feedback on the school's peer pairing scheme, which allocates new international students a 'buddy' helper (who may be another international student or a local student of similar or different cultural and language background).

The study focused on the following areas:

- ◆ What ratings did international students give to different aspects of friendship support?
- ◆ What were the experiences of international students of friendships with other students?
- ◆ What were the experiences of international students of buddies / peer pairing at the school?
- ◆ What were the attitudes of the international students towards the school staff and other students?

Survey

The research design was based on a paper questionnaire for self-completion by students in their own time and space. The survey was developed with multiple choice tick box response options, questions with Likert Scale options and statements with the option to award a 0 -10 rating score. The survey aimed to be quick and straightforward to produce and administer, as well as relatively inexpensive, given that the project was entirely self-funded and required completion within one university semester. Students could complete the questionnaire at school or at home at any time within a two to three week period from when they received their survey pack. This would minimize the project's demands on 'classroom time' and also help to make it clear that completion of the questionnaire was entirely voluntary, not a required piece of 'school work', and could be done anonymously. It would also allow students to complete the survey with no time pressure, in stages if preferred, and in privacy if they chose to, and to seek help in interpreting or translating any English as needed.

Sample

The research aimed to gather information from participants over 16 years of age. Students in this age group are able to give their own consent, whereas those under 16 require the consent of their parent(s), the majority of whom live outside of New Zealand.

The sample population for the research comprised 155 current international fee paying students over 16 years of age. Of these, 81 were female and 74 were male.

A list of students meeting the criteria for the sample population was generated by the school's computerised administration system. This provided a list of all current international fee paying students age 16 years and over, with their name and Form Class. This would facilitate distribution of the questionnaires through the Form Teachers, so that students would not be approached directly by the researcher at any time.

Process

The researcher met with the House Leader for each of the eight 'Whanau' Houses at the school. The sample population of 155 international fee paying students were located in 44 different Form Classes throughout the eight school Houses. All students at the school routinely go to their Form Classroom at the start of school every morning for registration, daily news and notices, and pastoral care support, before teaching classes commence. The researcher explained the purpose and nature of the research to each House Leader individually and provided them with written information on the project. Each House Leader subsequently met with the Form Teachers in their Whanau House, to pass on the instructions for administering the survey.

The Form Teachers then distributed the research pack (containing the Participant Information Sheet, the Survey Questionnaire and a return envelope) to those students in their Form Class who were on the list of the sample population. All students in the research sample population were also given a lollipop attached to the research pack as a small gesture of appreciation to them for considering participating in the research. The teachers agreed to take care to explain about the independent nature of the study and emphasise that this was not a required piece of school work or part of the school's monitoring of International Students. This was particularly important to emphasise, because the researcher works in the International Student Department and is involved in routine monitoring and support procedures. The Form Teachers would explain the procedure for students who would like to participate, for completion of the questionnaire and anonymous return.

Students were given a closing date for return of the surveys, and precise details of how and where to return the surveys, which was to a sealed box located in an easily accessible communal area at school where they could be posted unobserved in the plain return envelopes provided.

Results

Sixty nine students returned completed surveys by the deadline date. The questionnaires which were returned appeared to have had been carefully and thoroughly completed with very little missing data.

Questionnaires were returned by 28 male students and 41 female students. In view of the initial sample population size of 74 males and 81 females, this represented a slightly lower response rate from the male students (38% of males in the sample population returned a survey compared with 51% of females). To protect anonymity respondents were asked to indicate their age in whole years only and not to give a date of birth. The information collected indicated an approximate average age of 16.7 years for the participants.

Almost half the students who returned surveys had been in New Zealand for less than one year. Only nine respondents (around 13%) had been in New Zealand for more than two years. Over half the respondents (n=37 or 54%) reported having no family members in the country.

The survey questionnaire contained 19 statements describing aspects of friendship support. Students were asked to indicate, by circling a number from 0 - 10, how important each of these was for them.

Averages for each statement were calculated to see which scored the highest overall. The largest average score was given for, 'having someone to sit with at lunch time', with an average score of 8.26. There were 32 students who awarded this the maximum score of 10, indicating that for almost half the students, this was something which was very important to them.

The next highest averaged scores were awarded for:

8l 'Having a friend or friends who care about me' (average score 7.86)

8f 'Having a friend or friends to go to a café or restaurant for a drink or a meal' (average score 7.57)

and

8i 'Having a friend or friends who speak very good English' (average score 7.42).

The lowest scoring statement overall was:

8q 'Having a friend or friends who would lend money or belongings' (average 5.10)

Followed by the next lowest:

8c 'Having a friend or friends to walk to and from school with' (average 5.20)

Students were invited to add their own comments about aspects of friendship which were important to them. Of the 69 respondents, 14 wrote comments in this section. A selection of their responses are quoted below.

Comments on friendship from female students:

Having a friend or friends who can help me learn about New Zealand culture

Can listen to me

True friends – someone I can tell anything I want to (such as my problems) & someone who tell their difficulties or problem – honest to each other

Do not disregard for my race and nationality

See me as their friend and trust me

Comments on friendship from male students:

Can give me a ride

Have same interest with me

Pull me up whenever I fall, and always stand by me

I really hope to get more Kiwi friends as much as best!

Experiences of peer pairing

Over half the sample (37 out of 69 students) reported that they had been allocated a buddy when they first started at the school. There were 22 respondents who indicated they did not have a buddy and a further 10 who were unsure whether they had been paired with a buddy or not.

According to the respondents, over half of the buddies were 'local' or 'domestic' students, and around one third were 'international' students. The remainder indicated that they were unsure how best to describe them. Of the 37 students who reported having had a buddy, almost two-thirds (n=23) indicated that their buddy spoke the same first language as themselves.

Helpfulness of buddies

The most common assistance given to the students by their buddies was with helping students find their way around the school. Around 80% of the buddies (30 out of 37) were reported as having done this. The two next most commonly scored were: 'making introductions' and 'interpreting & informing about school events' (over half the buddies provided these two types of support). Only four students described their buddies as 'unhelpful'.

Perceptions of school and staff

The questionnaire contained four statements designed to measure the attitudes of the international students taking part in the survey towards the school and its staff. Interestingly, three participants chose not answer this question, (although it is noted that they had completed all the other sections in the survey questionnaire).

When averaged scores were compared between those students who had a buddy with those who did not, the scores were slightly higher (+1.17) for students who did have a buddy than those who did not (+0.93).

Friends at school

Students were asked to indicate how many friends they had at school, from each of three groups described as: 'New Zealanders', 'people from their home country' and 'people from other countries'. All of the 69 students in the sample completed this question, with only four students reporting having 'no' New Zealand friends and 60 indicating they had 'a few' or 'many'. When it came to reporting whether they had friends from 'other countries', there were no students who responded having 'none', and 68 students reporting they had 'a few' or 'many' friends in these categories. There were also 59 students whose response was that they had either 'a few' or 'many' friends from their own country.

Discussion

The response rate at the 'closing' date for returning the surveys was around 45%. It was disappointing not to be able to collect data from a higher proportion of the students, especially as the initial sample population of 155 students did not include around one hundred students at the school who were under 16 years old at the time of data collection (and therefore excluded by the research design).

Ethical considerations and the need to protect the anonymity of respondents meant that the researcher could not directly approach participants to participate, or take steps to remind or 'prompt' them to complete and return the survey questionnaire, which may have considerably improved the response rate.

Modification of the survey during the ethics approval process meant that most of the demographic questions included in the initial design had to be removed and so student responses could not be correlated to demographic factors such as country of origin.

A higher percentage of female than male students returned completed surveys, which could suggest amongst other possibilities a keener interest in the subject matter of friendships, more inclination to complete a questionnaire or perhaps just better personal organisational skills (such as remembering to return their survey by the closing date).

All the surveys returned had been thoroughly and carefully completed and there were very few omissions or missing data. Three students chose not to complete the question which involved commenting on the school staff (which had the option of a negative response). These three students did, however, answer all the other questions, so it is worth considering that they may have had concerns about anonymity or a reluctance to criticise the school or its teachers in any way.

When rating aspects of friendship, the highest score given was 'having someone to sit with at school lunch time'. This was a very interesting and useful finding, because it can be used specifically to develop some extra targeted and relevant support for international students during the school day, and also to inform the development of specific advice and training to students who are providing peer support for internationals.

It was encouraging to find that only four students had rated their buddy as 'unhelpful' and the buddies in general had given a variety of assistance; over half were reported as having facilitated social interaction with other students by making introductions.

It was also encouraging to find that almost all the participants indicated that they have either a 'few' or 'lots' of friends, from both local and international student groups.

Very few of the participants disagreed with the statements about local students and the school having a role to play in initiating or facilitating friendships, which is encouraging feedback for the school to develop further interventions in this area.

Thinking about further research, it would be interesting to gather some data about social interaction, friendships and networking online. This project focused on social relationships in the traditional sense of spending time with, and doing things in the company of, other people. Social networking sites have such a huge and rapidly developing membership and usage that it would be very interesting to conduct further research into the use, benefits and drawbacks of this aspect of on-line friendship and whether this is an area where the school could be active in a useful way.

Conclusion

International students bring economic and socio-cultural value to education providers and the wider community, but there are considerable risks and challenges for teenagers and young adults living and studying far away from family and friends in a foreign country.

As the international market for English language education becomes increasingly competitive, the overall experience of a study sojourn (including the rather intangible benefits of friendship), becomes all the more important.

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