

Teaching in superdiverse multicultural classrooms: Ideas from New Zealand secondary school teachers

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Abstract

Increased migration in recent years means that New Zealand classrooms are growing in cultural diversity – and in some communities, the extent and complexity of this has reached levels of ‘superdiversity’. This paper reports on how teachers ($n=23$) in four superdiverse secondary schools in New Zealand were responding to the growing cultural diversity in their classrooms. Four key approaches that were used by teachers in all schools to develop supportive relationships and foster greater inclusion are outlined. In addition, several teaching strategies are provided to help support teachers to face the growing complexity of mixed, hybrid and evolving identities of multi-ethnic students in their classrooms.

Key Points

1. The cultural diversity of student communities is growing in New Zealand schools.
2. The hybrid and plural identities that many students hold challenge some teacher’s understandings of identity and require more inclusive approaches. Teachers require skills and strategies to enhance the inclusion and success across multi-ethnic student populations.
3. As has been demonstrated by important research and practice that uplifts Māori learners, effective teaching approaches develop genuine relationships of care and foreground diverse students’ cultural experiences, identities and knowledge within curriculum and pedagogy.
4. Holding deeper cultural knowledge and developing genuine relationships help to avoid reinforcing one common national narrative by opening up space for students to narrate their lives and experiences into the culturally diverse tapestry of a community.

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Introduction

New Zealand currently has the fourth most foreign-born residents in the OECD – with 23% of the population born overseas (OECD, 2019). Growth in immigration in the past twenty years has particularly changed the demographics of Auckland city where, currently, 39% of the population was born overseas. This percentage beats London, Sydney, New York and Los Angeles – only Dubai, Brussels and Toronto rank higher than Auckland (International Organisation for Migration, 2015).

The extent and complexity of cultural diversity in some of New Zealand's urban neighbourhoods has reached a level that some people refer to as 'superdiversity' – or "a complexity of linguistic, religious, and social and cultural diversity, with implications for a shared civic culture or economic outcomes" (Vertovec, 2007, p. 2). An examination of superdiversity highlights new and complex patterns of inequality, prejudice and differential power relations driven by migration (Chan, 2020).

New Zealand schools are at the forefront of these changing demographics as they often represent the first point of contact for migrant families moving into neighbourhoods. Teachers need to be well-equipped to engage with the growing complexities of cultural and linguistic diversity that have profoundly changed student populations in many schools in recent years (Cardno et al., 2018).

In Aotearoa New Zealand understandings around culturally responsive teaching have grown from a commitment to Māori learners, through research and practice about how our education system can better serve tangata whenua. There has been less research about how culturally responsive practice presents in New Zealand's 'superdiverse' multicultural classrooms (Cardno et al., 2018; Salahshour, 2020). This paper draws on focus groups with teachers in four superdiverse schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on their experiences of increasing cultural diversity in their schools, four approaches to develop culturally inclusive and sustaining multicultural classrooms are suggested as well as some teaching strategies that promote greater inclusion of students' diverse and hybrid identities.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand

As New Zealand grows increasingly diverse, teachers are tasked with serving the multiple cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic makeup of students in their classrooms. So too, as

nations grow in diversity, notions of belonging may warrant revision so that majority ways of being are not privileged and minority identities and contributions are not disrespected or rendered invisible (Kymlicka, 2016). One dilemma is the extent to which ethnic minority students are expected to ‘fit into’ the dominant cultural traditions of a country, and/or how they can be supported to retain their language, culture, and rights equal citizens.

Within Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important to recognise how the growth of superdiversity sits within a context of the rights and histories of tangata whenua and comparatively recent British colonisation (Chan & Ritchie, 2020). The Treaty of Waitangi/ Te Tiriti o Waitangi became the founding document of New Zealand when it was signed by Māori and the Crown in 1840. This document promised signatories, both *tangata whenua* and *tangata tiriti* (‘people of the treaty’) protection, partnership and participation. In reality the parameters of this partnership became defined by the settler majority partner, with ensuing experiences of assimilation and inequalities for Māori that continue to this day (Berryman et al., 2018). New Zealand’s growing cultural diversity, including its educational response, needs to be recognised within a Tiriti-based right for Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) as tangata whenua (Chan & Ritchie, 2020).

A growing body of research has identified educational approaches which enable Māori to exercise their rights and sustain and revitalise their knowledge, culture, language, values, beliefs and practices (Bishop, 2012; Berryman, Lawrence, & Lamont, 2018; MacFarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2020). This work identifies the importance of relational pedagogies and culturally-responsive approaches for learning (Berryman et al., 2018; Bishop, 2012; MacFarlane et al., 2007). Much can be learned from culturally responsive pedagogy developed by Māori for Māori, including how it can benefit non-Māori students, especially those who do not identify with the dominant Pākehā / New Zealand European culture.

Internationally, a growing body of work has likewise identified the need to develop ‘culturally responsive’ or ‘culturally sustaining’ pedagogies to “sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Paris, 2012, p. 95; see also Ladson-Billing, 1995, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Key components of culturally responsive teaching include seeking to affirm students’ diverse backgrounds through cultivating a warm, relational and inclusive community as well as recognising and drawing upon cultural strengths of diverse students within teaching and learning, curriculum design,

or school-wide practices (Alim & Paris, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Knowing about the lives and diverse cultures of students helps teachers to design programmes that build upon – and stretch beyond – what learners know (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Importantly this includes a recognition that cultures are dynamic and not simply something from the past (Alim & Paris, 2017). In addition, culturally responsive pedagogy insists on academic excellence for all (with success collaboratively defined) and seeks to critically enrich strengths (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Against the backdrop of international literature and that with regard for Māori learners, a smaller body of research has explored effective teaching in superdiverse classrooms and early childhood education [ECE] centres in New Zealand (e.g. Chan, 2020; Cardno et al., 2018; Salahshour, 2020). For example, Chan's (2020) exploration of multicultural ECE centres found that the intentional inclusion of non-mainstream-centric resources (such as stories, songs, dance) into everyday practices normalised and valued diverse ways of life. Enriching opportunities for linguistic and cultural expression supported culturally diverse learners, as did enhanced parent-teacher dialogue. In one of the few research papers specifically about multi-ethnic secondary schools, Cardno et al. (2018) found that, while teachers valued their multi-ethnic populations, they found they were provided with very little professional development to support pastoral care or ensure greater inclusion. As a result, they found that approaches to minority ethnic groups were uneven. Our study intended to contribute to this small base of research on highly multi-cultural learning environments in New Zealand (Salahshour, 2020).

The Study: Exploring superdiverse high schools in NZ

'Superdiverse' secondary schools for this study were identified by examining student demographic information on the Education Counts website and in ERO reports. An initial group of schools were identified that had a wide ethnic diversity within their student population and had fewer than 50% of all students who were Pākehā. Four such schools were invited and agreed to participate, three schools in Auckland and one in Wellington – see Table 1.

Table 1: Case study schools and participants

School	Teacher participants	Years of teaching (years)	Ethnicity of teacher participants	No. of student participants	% of 1 st / 1.5 Generation participants	No of languages spoken in one allocated class (no. in class)
Kauri College	5	3-15+	Pākehā 4 British-born NZer 1	28	21%	9 (28)
Pūriri College	4	2-15+	Pākehā 4	53	35%	18 (27)
Rimu College	10	2-15+	Māori 3 Pākehā 4 Fijian Indian 1 South African 1 Scottish/Chinese Pākehā 1	63	49%	14 (28)
Totara College	4	2-30+	Pākehā 3 American-born NZer 1	36	25%	15 (26)
TOTAL	23			180		

Table 1 shows aspects of the cultural diversity in classrooms in these four schools and the teacher-participants' ethnic characteristics. Classrooms held high numbers of first-generation students who had moved to New Zealand as children (often referred to as the 1.5 generation). For example, 49% of participants in Rimu College had been born outside of New Zealand. There was knowledge of multiple languages in the classrooms, such as the 18 different languages across the student population in one class at Pūriri College. Teacher participants were primarily Pākehā European – and thus did not reflect the diversity of their student populations. These teachers taught a range of subject areas including science, maths, social science and languages.

The first author, also Pākehā, spent a number of weeks in each school in 2018 conducting classroom observations, and interviewing students ($n=180$) and teachers ($n=23$). This paper primarily draws from the interviews with the 23 teachers from the four schools who participated in focus groups. Two teacher participants (the second and third authors) joined the university researcher to develop further pedagogical responses to the data gathered. The next section considers teachers' reflection on the changes they had witnessed as their schools had become more culturally diverse in recent years.

Changing demographics in New Zealand classrooms

Teachers at all the schools noted changes to the classroom student composition as a result of new cultural groups in their school. One teacher described his school as a ‘microcosm’ of wider migration patterns in Auckland with the school “*more and more ethnically diverse over time*” (Rimu College). Cultural diversity was noted as the “*new norm*” (Kauri College), and increasingly they believed students in their schools “*have known nothing else in the community but a diverse community*” (Rimu College).

Changing demographics had accompanied changes in activities across the school. Teachers in all four schools noted the growth in popularity of cultural festivals, dance, international food and cultural events in the past decade or more. These interweaved with events that acknowledged tangata whenua, indigenous culture and seasonal rhythms of Aotearoa, such as Matariki and Te wiki o te reo Māori. Schools’ year planners included cultural events (Fia Fia, Pasifika, Korean, Chinese, Indian, and many more), International week (sharing food etc.), celebrations for Language Weeks (e.g. Tongan, Samoan), and cultural holy days and festivals. One school submitted 17 different cultural dance performances to Polyfest in 2018. Teachers noted a growth in some sports, such as Kilikiti, hockey and football, with a decline in others (swimming and rugby).

Importantly, in addition to these events, teachers had become more reflective about their role and the pedagogical changes they needed to make:

I think in the past seven years there has been more of an emphasis on teacher practice and pedagogy around cultural and diversity. And so, it's got us thinking about it. We are looking at what [key competencies of learning] would look like in a multicultural world. (Totara College)

This growing critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995), or “*mind frame shifting*” as one teacher put it, encouraged teachers to adapt their pedagogy and curriculum to better reflect the diverse students within their schools. We now outline four of the approaches used by the participating teachers that helped to create more inclusive and culturally sustaining classrooms.

Approaches for developing cultural inclusive and sustaining multicultural classrooms

Approach 1: Build genuine relationships with students

The most fundamental priority for teachers was relationship-building with the diverse students in their classes. As one teacher at Totara College put it “*relationships are absolutely fundamental; know their backgrounds*”. All participating teachers recommended getting to know students individually, “*taking time to listen to them as well, give them opportunity to share with you, and hear what they're saying*” (Pūriri College). Two-way relationships required teachers to “*share who you are*” without “*over trying*”. Two teachers at Pūriri College recommended “*being yourself*” as “*if you're just yourself, and you're open with them, they pick up on it very quickly*”. Building trust and deepening relationships took time, including outside of the busy classroom,

... for a lot of these students, the reason why they can share this information with us is because we're making an effort to get to know them, and finding out who are they, where they're from, what is it that makes them unique. So, I think for any teacher that's wanting to get involved in diversity it's about putting in the effort, making the time and caring about the students. (Rimu College)

A lot can be learned from culturally responsive and relational approaches with Māori students to build on trust and reciprocity (Berryman et al., 2018; Bishop, 2012; MacFarlane, et al, 2007). The importance of recognising students’ cultural knowledge, assets, and strengths resonated in our study, although the complexity of teaching multi-ethnic students raised some additional challenges as discussed in the following section.

Approach 2: Look for opportunities to incorporate students’ cultural knowledge and experience into teaching

Teachers talked at length about the strategies they used to incorporate students’ knowledge, experiences and backgrounds into their teaching. This included opening up the curriculum in ways “*that will let students integrate aspects of their culture into class work, into assignments*” (Rimu College). Teachers of all subjects developed ways to incorporate students’ cultural knowledge and experiences. To do so was highly rewarding as

...some of these kids have amazing back stories sitting behind. And they're a resource as well, sitting in such a culturally diverse classroom, such a rich background that you can pull on the students’ background knowledge. (Rimu College).

To incorporate diverse cultural knowledges is much more complex than a ‘food, flags and festivals’ approach. Teachers talked about the challenges of avoiding tokenism and perpetuating ethnic stereotypes. They highlighted the importance of not “*pigeon-holing*”

students or expecting them to represent a certain cultural group. For example, a social studies teacher at Pūriri College described a unit she developed on traditional and liberal Hinduism where she was approached by many of her Indian students who said they'd learned new things about their religion and culture. Another Pūriri College English teacher felt that a balance was needed between 'letting kids be the experts', without making assumptions about their knowledge or comfort in sharing it. She explained that students may be *"too shy to [talk about their culture] in front of other people, or they just don't know, and they want to learn about their culture, rather than be the expert at sharing it."* She very carefully selected poems, films and texts for student analysis given that the previous life experiences of her diverse students meant some felt confused about or *"were not identifying"* with their culture of origin. The teacher was cautious about 'imposing' cultural texts and considered carefully the type of messages the students could take away from each text, wary that texts could perpetuate cultural stereotypes.

A further area of complexity in these superdiverse schools was the feeling of uncertain cultural identity that some Pākehā European students in these schools expressed. As one teacher explained *"we have to talk about how to teach white kids that they have a culture, cause actually, they do have a culture – it's all around here but its invisible because it's the dominant one"*. This uncertain cultural distinctiveness of being Pākehā reflects the unseen privilege of assuming Pākehā culture is 'normal' (therefore unseen), whereas ethnic culture is 'exotic' (therefore more visible) and has been found in research in wider studies of settler societies beyond New Zealand (Bell, 2006). Teachers in the study talked about the importance of encouraging all students to know their own identity and cultures as well as understand the culture of others. They encouraged Pākehā students to recognise the privileges they held as part of the dominant culture. In the words of one Māori teacher at Rimu College:

Recognise that everyone has culture to celebrate: See I mean the culture space is all about belief systems, and how you live day to day, and what you see as right and wrong, that's your culture, and that's developed from your peers, your parents, their parents whatever, whatever that is, everything. So everyone has a culture, it's just defined in different ways, you know we say a prayer at dinner, we go to church, we play sports or we play a violin, or we read books that's a culture.

Students in the study also commented how gaining confidence in their own culture helped them to embrace others' cultures more.

Teaching strategy: Teachers in several schools talked about the value of undertaking oral histories. This involved students interviewing older members of their family, community or neighbourhood. Such oral histories could include a rich array of interview questions, including family lineage, whakapapa, their relationship to New Zealand and the communities they belonged to, and how they viewed their identity as 'Kiwis'. Oral histories encourage the recognition of every student's culture, traditions and mana.

Approach 3: Recognising the complexity of hybrid and plural identities

One further theme that was apparent across all of these superdiverse schools was how limiting traditional understandings of identity and culture could be. Teachers in all four schools recognised that many of their students held mixed identities – and were aware that students who held hybrid or plural identities were “*a lot, way more than we anticipated*” (Kauri College). In our study, one in five (21% (39/180) of the participants indicated mixed ethnic identities.

Holding mixed ethnic or race identities in Aotearoa New Zealand is not uncommon and is growing. In 2013, 11.2% of the population identified with more than one ethnic group, with younger people at a much higher rate than older people (22.8% under 14; 2.6% 65+ years) (Stats NZ, 2014). Yet, concepts of mixedness are often invisible in public discussion around identity and belonging in Aotearoa, with greater acknowledgement often given to singular identities (Rocha & Webber, 2018; Spoonley, 2018).

Notions of mixedness or mixed identities challenge and complicate understandings of race and conceptions of identity (Rocha & Webber, 2018). One teacher described how she found out this complexity in her first year of teaching when she decided to conduct an ethnic survey of the class to practise the skill of drawing a bar graph:

....and they're like 'but Miss what if you are like two different ethnic groups or three?', and I'm like 'I don't know, just choose one!'. And then afterwards I'm like 'oh no!' I shouldn't have put them in that position'. (Kauri College)

As this highlights, some people's unexamined conceptions of ethnicity are bound up with narrow or homogenous ideas of ethnic identity. Historically, assumptions about identity were often founded on racist forms of 'correct' classifications of ethnicity and race (Rocha & Webber, 2018) and these can infiltrate teaching approaches. As one teacher put it, such ideas “*represent ethnicity in one way [that] is too linear. You need them, yeah a bit more [open]*”. As Paul Spoonley (2018) says “in diverse societies like New Zealand, we need to pay

attention to these in-between spaces and evolving identities, not as something marginal, but as central to our dynamic identity” (p. xii).

Teaching strategy: One teacher in the study talked about how she had responded to ethnic mixedness and hybrid identities in her students by redeveloping an identity activity she used with her Year 9 students. Creating multiple paper dolls identities opened up much wider and multiple notions of identity. Figure 1 shows the multiple ways a young female student who had arrived from Egypt to New Zealand identified herself. Such an activity opens up self-expression and diverse interpretations of identity.

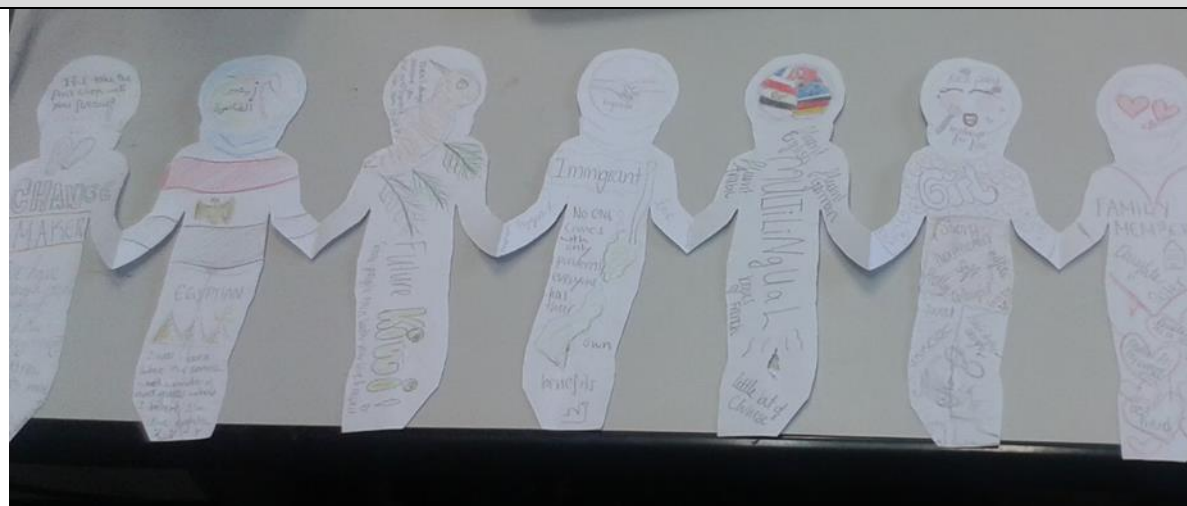


Figure 1: This student describes herself identity in multiple ways – including as an ‘immigrant’, a ‘believer’ (of Islam), ‘a friend’, a ‘girl’, an ‘Egyptian’, a ‘family member’, ‘multilingual’, a ‘change maker’ and a ‘future Kiwi’.

Approach 4: Look for unity as well as diversity

One of the challenges teachers identified in superdiverse multicultural classrooms was to find points of unity and not only diversity – as James Banks (2015) asserts, citizens in a diverse democratic society should be able to maintain attachments to their cultural communities as well as participate effectively in the shared national culture. As he points out, unity without diversity reinforces homogeneous nationalistic notions of inclusion and citizenship – while diversity without unity leads to splintering of groups and fragmentation of the nation-state. Banks concludes that “diversity and unity should co-exist in a delicate balance in democratic multicultural nations” (p. 97).

Teachers in our study also highlighted the importance of finding commonalities as well as celebrating diversity. One Pūriri College teacher stated how she sought to “*find times to work on things together which everyone can relate to and identify with, so we can ‘connect’ – even with all our differences*”. She described the challenge this represented when she herself was

enmeshed in her own culture. Her use of a term ‘*a classic Cinderella tale*’ resulted in blank stares from her students, and in another instance, the use of a Biblical reference led to confusion by many in the class. A teacher at Kauri College described how she reinforced common humanity between her diverse students as

although they're all different, [what they have in common is] getting bigger and bigger over time, and because of that, their relationship with each other is getting stronger. So, you know ‘ok we might be from this culture and this culture, but your mum tells you to do the dishes just as much as my mum does!’ So, they're able to go ‘well actually we are quite different but, we have far more in common than not’.

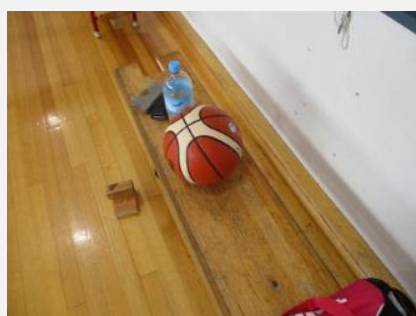
Other teachers reinforced this, describing how they sought to develop unity within their topic selection. The English teacher at Pūriri College discussed earlier who struggled to find common texts, explained how she found literature that all students can “*all join in on together*”, by focusing on what the students shared. She had found a poem about a local place all students knew, and explored place-based community experiences, including critiques of cultural stereotypes which all students shared. Holding deeper cultural knowledge and developing genuine relationships helped to avoid reinforcing one common national narrative by opening up space for students to narrate their lives and experiences into the culturally diverse tapestry of a community – such as the strategy Humans in Our Place described below.

Teaching strategy: In order to affirm and deepen understandings of students’ identities, one teacher developed a **Humans of Our Place** activity. Students took photographs to narrate aspects of their identity and cultural affiliations and their sense of belonging in New Zealand. Their narratives showed the evolving nature of their identities and how these were founded on identities as New Zealanders, but also former homelands. Here is an example from Rosa who described herself as half Filipino and half Kiwi and her sense of belonging, and at times loss, as she settled into New Zealand (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Humans of Our Place: Rosa’s story



Rosa: "I'm half Filipino and half NZ European. I'm just a big old pot. They're like 'let's put some Filipino. OK. Wait! It's a bit plain. Let's add some England, a sprinkle of Ireland, maybe a little bit of Spain. And a bit of Māori too - why not?'"



My mum's Filipino. Here are some photos of us at a Filipino party with some of my Mum's friends from church. So they had some Filipino food, not as much as there normally is, but they had some rice in the first one, and then some other food there. We do use rice a lot in our Filipino food, as Asian culture normally does.

One of the things that makes me feel a bit left out of my culture is that my mum's speaks Tagalog, her native language is Tagalog, but I never learnt that and so, sometimes when I'm talking to my Nana on the phone, she has to speak in English, and I can't communicate with her as well.



I play basketball. It's something that I like to do but also something that's part of my culture as it is a popular sport in the Philippines. It makes me really proud of myself and my country".

Conclusion

This study confirmed that strategies found to be supportive of Māori and Pasifika students that are founded on strongly inclusive, safe and warm relationships, were also highly valuable for multicultural classrooms. The study highlighted some of the challenges of finding common shared points of unity, as well as responding to the complexity of increasingly plural, transnational and evolving identities in New Zealand classrooms. As teachers in this study have shown, the rewards and opportunities for deep learning in multicultural classrooms begin with an awareness of culture, an appreciation of strengths and a critical consciousness of the value (and potential marginalisation) of diverse students and their understandings and experiences. The teaching approaches and strategies identified demonstrate ways to not only deepen teacher's knowledge of their students' cultural identities, but also to enable diverse young people to express and grow in their own identities. Such strategies are useful not only for superdiverse schools, but indeed for all schools who seek inclusive school communities.

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