Making friends in Australia: expectations and experiences of Chinese international students in Australian secondary schools

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Abstract

International students in the secondary school sector are a particularly vulnerable group due to their age and status as unaccompanied minors. The establishment of friendships is an important component of the adjustment for these students as they transition into their new school environments. This paper presents issues related to friendships, investigated as part of a larger study examining the motivations, expectations and experiences of international students from the People's Republic of China studying in Australian secondary schools. Data were collected in two phases from 116 international students and 10 teachers using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and descriptive analyses employed. Because there is a paucity of information about the experiences of international secondary school students, this was an exploratory study that has contributed understanding of the lived experiences of a small group of international students from mainland China. The study identified that expectations regarding the establishment of friendships are not being met, and that international students from China are seeking more opportunities to form relationships with Australian peers. To reduce dissonance between expectations and experiences of studying in Australia, it is recommended that Australian schools work with both international and domestic students to provide authentic opportunities to build peer relationships.

Keywords International students · Secondary education · Chinese students · Peer relationship · Friendship

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Introduction

The recent global COVID-19 pandemic has provided an unprecedented interruption to global travel, and highlighted the importance of the international education sector to the sustainability of Australian schools and universities (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020), contributing A\$40.4 billion to the national economy in 2019 (Ross, 2020). International student enrolments in Australian secondary schools declined by 20% between November 2019 and November 2020 (Australian Education International, 2020). Travel restrictions, coupled with home isolation requirements, have resulted in around one third of schools sector student visa holders from China located outside Australia (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020).

The ramifications of this shift in demographic in Australian classrooms as a result of the pandemic are significant, for both Australian and international students. International students, or “non-citizen students who cross [national] borders for study” (Marginson et al., 2010, p. 24), enrich schools by providing opportunities for Australian students to develop skills in intercultural and multilingual interaction, and supporting Australian peers in developing both academic and cultural understandings through a curriculum that caters for diversity (Arkoudis Marginson et al., 2010). The recent decrease in international students studying in Australian classrooms has restricted the extent of international connections available to domestic Australian students. Opportunities for language skill development and cultural awareness are also valued by international students choosing to study in Australia (Australian Education International, 2015). International students from China have reported envisaging a role for themselves in transferring “knowledge, resources, capital and connections” (Fong, 2011, p. 72) from abroad to assist in the development of China, but also, in the interim, seeking to become international citizens. As international qualifications become more widespread in China, an emphasis on the accumulation of genuine human and cultural capital during the study sojourn has increased. For families who can afford the substantial investment in both secondary school and tertiary level education abroad, opportunities to accumulate these forms of capital over a longer period of time are prized (Xiang & Wei, 2009). For international students, the recent restrictions in global mobility have limited the advantages previously available during the period of international study.

However, the move to other countries is not without challenges for international students, particularly in relation to disconnection from family and friends at home (Kim & Okazaki, 2014). This sense of disconnection may be exacerbated in a period where global travel is restricted and opportunities to return home are significantly more limited than previously. Greater community awareness is required in Australia with regard to the impact of international students creating more diverse and inclusive communities (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). Previous research reveals a lack of information regarding the expectations and experiences of international students with regards to establishing friendships during their studies in the Australian secondary school sector. With current opportunities

for interaction between local and international students further restricted in Australian schools as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this is an important area of research as Australia seeks to remain “a welcoming place for international students to study” (Council for International Education, 2020, p. 1). This study aims to fill a gap in the literature regarding friendships between local and international students, and to provide stakeholders with information that can be used to improve the transition and experience for international students during their studies in Australian secondary schools.

Literature review

The establishment of friendships with Australian students is a common expectation of incoming international students entering Australian secondary schools (Australian Education International, 2013) and marketing materials promoting Australian schools invariably contain images of cross-cultural friendships that perpetuate these expectations. (See, for example, studyinaustralia.gov.au.) Such friendships potentially deepen understandings of, and respect for, the varying cultural backgrounds of peers; develop global understandings; increase language skills (Arkoudis, Baik, et al., 2010; Arkoudis, Marginson, et al., 2010); and provide essential support for unaccompanied international students as they undertake the often stressful process of completing secondary school studies in a new and unfamiliar country (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004). This literature review introduces the reader to the available research regarding the expectations of international students with regard to establishing friendships in Australia and challenges encountered, followed by strategies for supporting social relationships.

Social networks in the secondary school sector

In the secondary school sector in particular, the establishment of new friendships presents unique challenges. International students often enter their new school in the last two years of secondary school. Strong friendships have often already formed between existing students in these schools, and some international students confront ambivalence on the part of local students towards mutual interaction (Australian Education International, 2013). The 2012 *International Students Survey* reported that 86% of all school sector international student participants indicated they would like to have more friendships with Australian students. Sixty-four percent of these respondents felt they had made an effort to establish these friendships and 40% felt Australian students were not interested in interacting with international students. (Australian Education International, 2013a). The more recent 2018 survey reported that although 83% of students had made an effort to make friends with Australian students, only 67% had more than two Australian students as friends (Australian Education International, 2019). These findings reflect advice from Australian international secondary school students to incoming international students that opportunities to interact with local students rarely present themselves: the expectation is

that the international student will “make the first move” to engage in conversation (Arkoudis, Marginson et al., 2010).

Challenges establishing social networks

It is not uncommon for international students to establish friendships with students from a similar cultural background in their new school, but these students have also reported feelings of guilt because they believe these friendships detracted from their adjustment to the local culture and English language development. (Kim & Okazaki, 2014). Although international students reported wanting to make local friends, they also described avoiding contact with local students because of their own anxiety interacting in English, or that limited English language skills were a barrier to the formation of friendships with local students even when attempts at interaction were made (Australian Education International, 2013a). Some students have turned to friendships and entertainment online in an effort to overcome loneliness (Kim & Okazaki, 2014).

Research in the tertiary sector provides substantial data to supplement these studies in secondary schools, and overwhelmingly concludes that the establishment of social networks for international students is a difficult, and often unsuccessful, endeavour (Arkoudis et al., 2019; Arkoudis, Baik, et al., 2010; Arkoudis, Marginson, et al., 2010; Council of Australian Governments, 2010; Sawir et al., 2008; Teo & Arkoudis, 2019; Tran & Pham, 2016; Yates & Wahid, 2013), to the extent that disconnection from the local community, including local students, has been identified as the greatest source of dissatisfaction for international students (Tran, 2020).

Some international students are ambivalent about establishing relationships with local students (Berno & Ward, 2002; Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Ward et al., 2001), but more common is a desire to make friends. It appears that this intent is not commonly reciprocated amongst local peers in the tertiary sector (Akazaki, 2010; Andrade, 2006; Brebner, 2008; Tarry, 2011; Ward et al., 2009). A lack of openness from local students towards international students has been noted (Andrade, 2006; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016; Patterson et al., 1998; Tran & Pham, 2016), with voluntary interactions occurring rarely (Akazaki, 2010; Tarry, 2011; Ward et al., 2009), and superficially (Schartner, 2015). Domestic students are sometimes simply unaware the international students they study alongside are wanting to make friends (Campbell, 2012). Feedback from local students in a study at the University of Western Australia suggested they considered the formation of friendships with international students to be unnecessary, to the extent that they were “unimagined” (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016).

Cultural difference has been given as a potential explanation for friendships between local and international students being difficult to establish (Akazaki, 2010; Berno & Ward, 2002; Schartner, 2015) and, in particular, the expectation that international students will assimilate into the cultural norms of the country in which they are studying (Akazaki, 2010; Arkoudis, Marginson et al., 2010; Schartner, 2015). In her study of Chinese international students in the United States, however, Tang T. Heng (2017) noted international students were seeking reciprocal interest in their

own cultural backgrounds, rather than an assumption that the interest in culture was a one-way exchange.

Marangell et al. (2018) argued for a community-based approach to internationalisation by harnessing the diversity in the local community to ultimately benefit both international and local students. Labelling of students as ‘international’ or ‘local’, or, similarly, ‘Asian’ or ‘Australian’ has been identified as a dividing practice that may perpetuate stereotyping along nationalistic boundaries rather than considering the nuances and possibilities of intercultural parallels (Jones, 2017; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005). International students often befriend other international students of different nationalities, thereby challenging the assertion that cultural difference inhibits friendship possibilities (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005) and suggesting instead that culture is a fluid concept that may be recreated in different contexts (Nasir & Hand, 2006).

Although cultural difference itself may not be an insurmountable barrier to the establishment of friendships, neo-racism has been identified as a more pervasive social problem for international students in Australia. Students have described interactions with Australians resulting in a range of negative experiences, from feelings of discomfort and verbal harassment to physical confrontation (Lee & Rice, 2007). Students have expressed concerns about personal safety as a result of prejudice, particularly before they are able to establish friendships in Australia (Nyland et al., 2013). In the secondary school sector in Australia, international students have been described as “highly visible targets...more likely [than local students] to be disciplined and excluded for their behaviour” (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005, p. 61).

Difficulties in encouraging interaction between local and international students have also been exacerbated by high international student numbers (Bodycott, 2012; Brown, 2009; Ie, 2009; Schartner, 2015), and students undertaking paid employment, thereby reducing the time available for social interaction with classmates (Benzie, 2010; Tran & Pham, 2016; Yates & Wahid, 2013).

Strategies for promoting social relationships

Previous research has indicated a lack of responsibility by education institutions for preparing both incoming international students, and their receiving communities, for students’ arrival in Australia and has suggested both “host” and “guest” were therefore equally overwhelmed by the resulting changes to daily life (Jacubowicz & Monani, 2010). It has been suggested that educational institutions need to shoulder greater responsibility for providing a safe and welcoming environment for incoming students (Freeman & Li, 2019; Lee & Rice, 2007; Ziguras & Harwood, 2011). Positive interactions with local students have been demonstrated to increase confidence and a sense of belonging (Popadiuk, 2010; Vasilopoulos, 2016). One example of a program for establishing relationships between local and international students in the tertiary sector was established in New Zealand, where local students gained course credit by pairing with newly arrived international students as ‘buddies’ for a semester (Campbell, 2012). Limitations to this initiative included a feeling that interactions were “forced”, due to the compulsory nature of the program, and that

time constraints made it difficult to find mutually convenient meeting times (Campbell, 2012, p. 219). Students have also reported some success in forming relationships with Australian students through extra-curricular clubs and societies, sport, and religious groups (Menzies & Baron, 2014).

Online networking options supplement those available in person, and international students experiencing loneliness commonly turn to the internet as a social outlet (Kim & Okazaki, 2014). Suggestions have also been made that communicative technology is potentially useful in connecting international students with peers in culturally and linguistically diverse academic environments (Gray et al., 2010), but that online technologies are only one resource in a range of networks that are necessary to support international students in establishing adequate social support (Matthews & Sidhu, 2005).

The above research, much of which is specific to the tertiary sector, suggests that despite international students commonly seeking to establish friendships with Australian students, these friendships are typically more difficult to establish than expected. Research on the specific nature of the expectations of students entering the Australian secondary school sector is particularly sparse, perhaps as a result of the difficulties involved in making contact with incoming students prior to their arrival in Australia. The AEI International Student Survey (Australian Education International, 2013) provides statistical data regarding the experiences of international students studying in Australian secondary schools, however there is a lack of narrative data available about the social dimension of their Australian secondary schooling. This study addresses these gaps through an investigation of international secondary school students' expectations and experiences of making friends in Australia.

Methodology

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger exploratory study designed to identify the motivations, expectations and experiences of Chinese international students entering Australian secondary schools. This paper reports findings arising from the study about the expectations and experiences of these students with regard to establishing friendships with peers in Australia.

The study was designed around a sociocultural exploratory approach that foregrounds interactions between people and their community, as the social dimension is the primary dimension of consciousness according to Lev Vygotsky, the psychologist to whom sociocultural theory is most commonly attributed (Wertsch, 1991). This approach interprets realities as explicit, local and established, based on individual and social experiences and the understandings of the people holding them (Punch & Oancea, 2014). According to Vygotskian theory, the development of a personality takes place in the social situations encountered, and as these social situations change (Davydov & Kerr, 1995). That personality is a fluid concept, and therefore that the personalities of both the international students and their local peers may be constructed and reconstructed through their interactions with each other, suggests possibilities for these students in the establishment of friendships during their period of study together. Given limited research around the experiences of international

secondary school students in Australian schools, this approach supports the exploration of the expectations and experiences of these students with regard to establishing friendships. This study was designed to explore the perceptions of international students about the establishment of friendships in Australia in two different socio-cultural contexts: firstly, in their home country of China, and then after arrival in Australia and commencement of studies in their Australian secondary school.

Researchers adopted a mixed methods approach involving questionnaires and interviews to provide a more complex understanding of the research questions than is possible through the use of a single approach, and to enhance the validity of the findings through triangulation of data from these tools (Creswell, 2008; Punch & Oancea, 2014). The study consisted of two phases. Phase 1 used questionnaires and follow-up interviews to collect data on the motivations and expectations of students before they left China to commence their secondary school studies in Australia. Phase 2 involved the collection of information regarding Chinese international students' experiences of studying in an Australian secondary school. This information was collected after students had commenced their studies in Australia, to enable comparison between expectations and experiences. Researchers again employed questionnaires and interviews to gather information from students. Supplementary interviews were also conducted with the teachers of international students in Australia, on their perceptions of the experience for Chinese students entering Australian secondary schools.

Following institutional approval for this project from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), researchers recruited participants for this study through the gatekeepers who held the contact details of potential students preparing to study in Australian secondary schools: (i) Australian secondary schools, and (ii) education agents. These gatekeepers were identified from Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) data and approached individually to request their cooperation in the study, following the additional relevant ethics approval processes required by State Government education departments (for government schools only). Schools and education agents agreeing to participate were each provided with a Plain Language Statement (PLS) containing details of the project and they were asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the recruitment phase of the study. They were then asked to either provide the researcher with the email addresses of the parents or legal guardians of international students who had enrolled to study in an Australian secondary school, or to forward the relevant PLSs and consent forms, along with a link to the online questionnaire, to these parents or legal guardians on the researcher's behalf. The PLSs for potential student and parent participants provided information about the project including what participation involved, that participation was voluntary and that pseudonyms would be used to protect participants' identity. Because it was predicted that the number of respondents was likely to be limited, saturation sampling (Cohen et al., 2013) was chosen, whereby each potential participant for whom contact details were available was invited to participate. The study reported in this paper involved 116 students and 10 teachers /international student coordinators. Sixty two students participated in Phase 1 of the study and 74 students and 10 teachers participated in Phase 2. Twenty students (17.2%) participated in both phases of the study, 42 students

(36.2%) participated in Phase 1 only and 54 students (46.6%) participated in Phase 2 only. As it became evident that fewer than 50% of participants from Phase 1 of the study had accepted the invitation to participate in Phase 2, additional students who had recently commenced secondary schooling in Australia were invited to participate in Phase 2 of the study only.

Questionnaires were chosen as the initial method of data collection in both phases of the study in order to encourage maximum participation through a quick and simple to complete format. Questionnaire items were substantiated and validated by previous studies (Kim & Okazaki, 2014; Kuo & Roysircar, 2004; Marginson et al., 2010; Popadiuk, 2010). These questionnaires provided an initial data set that allowed for comparison between the expectations and experiences of international students. Fifty-nine questionnaires were completed during Phase 1 of the study, and a further 74 were completed during Phase 2.

This data set was then enhanced by interviews with a smaller number of participants, including international students and teachers, which added detail to the initial data set. Semi-structured interview questions based on the questionnaire items were chosen to enable the flexibility to explore ideas in depth, but also to collect specific data in response to themes arising from questionnaires. This format allowed researchers to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondents, and to new ideas on the topic as noted by Merriam (2009, p. 89). Nineteen students participated in Phase 1 interviews. Eleven students and 10 teachers and/or coordinators participated in Phase 2 interviews.

Questionnaires were piloted with international students already studying in an Australian secondary school. Students were invited to participate in the pilot based on their similarity to the intended participants, in terms of cultural and linguistic background, as recommended by Gay (2006). Feedback from the pilot was used in revision and refinement of the questionnaire, particularly with regard to the use of colloquial or complex language, as suggested by Drew et al., (2013).

The researchers employed an inductive approach to the interpretation and analysis of data to identify emerging themes. Themes arising from analysis of questionnaire data were further explored during semi-structured interviews. Synthesis of the findings from analyses of the data combined the strengths of both questionnaires and interviews (Punch & Oancea, 2014) and added validity to the research design through a process of triangulation, through the use of multiple methods of data collection about the same phenomenon (Brewer & Hunter, 2006; Cohen et al., 2013). Descriptive analyses were then employed to summarise the data, and identify similarities and differences between expectations of participants in Phase 1 and the experiences of participants during Phase 2.

Limitations

Difficulty recruiting participants was a significant limitation to this study, resulting in a smaller than expected sample size. Reasons for this difficulty possibly included the varied geographical locations of potential participants resulting in the inability to make face-to-face contact, extensive and varied state

government and school research approval processes, potential participants who were themselves already involved in time-consuming secondary school application processes, student concerns that participation may affect acceptance into the intended Australian secondary school, and school concerns that participation may adversely influence potential students against studying in Australia. Although student numbers overall were sufficient, the small proportion of students participating in both phases of the study limited the comparison of data sets between both phases with the same students.

Anonymity was built into the study design to encourage maximum participation. Anonymity, however, also limited the researchers' ability to disclose demographic data about the students and schools involved in the study.

Presentation of findings

Findings of the study are presented using descriptive analyses to summarise data and compare the expectations of students regarding the establishment of friendships, and their subsequent experiences. Interview data are quoted verbatim to fully represent the voices of the students by portraying the natural rhythms and sayings of their speech, with a larger Australian study of international students in the tertiary sector, *International Student Security* (Marginson et al., 2010), used as a model in this regard.

Degree of confidence making friends

During Phase 1 of the study, prior to students departing for Australia, nearly two thirds of students ($n=35$, 63.7%) rated themselves as either *very confident* or *confident* about making new friends in Australia, as shown in Table 1. The proportion of students describing themselves as *very confident* or *confident* about their friendships in Australia was lower, 55.5% ($n=40$), during the second phase of the study.

Table 1 Degree of confidence making new friends in Australia

	Phase 1		Phase 2	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Very confident	10	18.2	7	9.7
Confident	25	45.5	33	45.8
A little confident	9	16.4	20	27.8
A little anxious	9	16.4	8	11.1
Anxious	0	0.0	3	4.2
Very anxious	2	3.6	1	1.4
Total	55	100	72	100

Table 2 Expectations and experiences regarding difficulty making friends

	Phase 1		Phase 2	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	13	26.0	11	15.3
A little	31	62.0	54	75.0
No	6	12.0	7	9.7
Total	50	100	72	100

Table 3 Expectations and experiences of friendships in Australia

	Phase 1		Phase 2	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
International students	4	7.7	16	22.2
A mixture of both	45	86.5	54	75.0
Australian students	3	5.8	2	2.8
Total	52	100	72	100

Degree of difficulty making friends

The degree of difficulty in establishing new friendships during Phase 2 appeared to be less than anticipated by participants in Phase 1 of the study. Although 26.0% ($n=13$) of students anticipated the establishment of friendships in Australia would be difficult, only 15.3% ($n=11$) reported this level of difficulty in Phase 2 of the study, as shown in Table 2. There was also a lower proportion of students who indicated no difficulty in the establishment of friendships (9.7%, $n=7$) during Phase 2, when compared to those anticipating no difficulty during Phase 1 (12.0%, $n=6$).

Friendships with local and international students

Data suggest that the extent to which international students were successful in making friends with Australian students did not often meet expectations. Students were also asked to provide information on whether they expected friends in Australia to be local students and/or other international students. Responses, presented in Table 3, suggest most students in Phase 1 expected to make friends with a mixture of international and local students (86.5%, $n=45$), and only 7.7% ($n=4$) expected to make friends exclusively with other international students. However, responses from students in Phase 2 showed that 75.0% ($n=54$) of students reported making a mix of friends, and nearly one quarter of students (22.2%, $n=16$) made friends exclusively with other international students.

A high proportion of students (92.7%, $n=51$) indicated during Phase 1 that they specifically wanted to make Australian friends, as shown in Table 4. During Phase 2, 84.7% of students ($n=61$) indicated that they sought to make more Australian friends. Only four students (7.3%) responded *don't care* during Phase 1 when asked

Table 4 Extent to which (More) Australian friendships are sought

	Students			
	Phase 1		Phase 2	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	51	92.7	61	84.7
Don't care	4	7.3	10	13.9
No	0	0.0	1	1.4
Total	55	100	72	100

if they wanted to make Australian friends, however this proportion was larger during Phase 2, with 13.9% ($n=10$) indicating they *don't care*.

Factors that enable or inhibit the establishment of friendships

During interviews, participants spoke in detail about some of the factors that enabled and inhibited the establishment of new friendships in Australia. These included the existence of established friendship groups, cultural differences, personality factors, language barriers, and the influence of other international students.

Established friendship groups

Most questionnaire participants responded that they expected to make Australian friends, although interview data suggested that students did not expect this endeavour to be without difficulty:

Afraid that students there will not accept your sudden appearance. Like, you suddenly appear in their lives and join the friend circle, and...that would be like an invasion, not be comfortable for them, so I think it's probably be hard to make friends with them. (Guiying, female student, Phase 1 interview)

Difficulty breaking into established friendship groups for many newly arrived international students was confirmed by one of the teachers during Phase 2 of the study, who explained that "Aussie kids, they're busy...they've probably established their friendship groups a lot of the time" (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview).

Common interests and cultural differences

During Phase 1 of the study, Jianhong expressed confidence about making new friends in Australia due to anticipated similar interests, predicting "I think make friends so easy. When you have some similar (feeling?) or similar interesting, you don't feel nervous, you just talk a long time friends, so I think it's easy to make friends" (Jianhong, male student, Phase 1 interview). Hongmi, though, anticipated that similar interests were not necessarily common between Chinese and Australian

students because “we don’t have the...(laughs)...topic! Topic! When we talk, we don’t have the same topic” (Hongmi, female student, Phase 1 interview).

Sport was described during Phase 2 as a common interest that facilitated engagement on a social level with Australian students. Aiguo explained “when I first came here I couldn’t speak English...but I could play basketball” (Aiguo, male student, Phase 2 interview), and a teacher also felt that sport was integral to the establishment of friendships between Australian and Chinese students: “That’s how Aussie kids make friends too isn’t it? I mean it’s ingrained in Australian culture but, yeah, football... they’ve got soccer, all the Chinese people love basketball” (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview). Those students not interested in sport reported difficulties finding common ground with their Australian classmates. Chenglei explained that “It’s very hard to hang out with local friends for me. I don’t really like footy and stuff, and all I hang out with is just some friends, we play video games together” (Chenglei, male student, Phase 2 interview).

Also raised at interview was the difficulty in establishing deeper friendships cross-culturally, beyond surface level interaction. Students were able to participate in similar activities together, but connecting with each other on a deeper level was an area of difficulty. Ruogang explained that “the culture is quite different. You can’t just translate Chinese to English...I do think the Australians do want to communicate with us and the international students do want to communicate with the others. But they just feel weird” (Ruogang, male student, Phase 2 interview). Teachers also acknowledged this difficulty, without being able to specify why deeper relationships were not being established: “I don’t know whether they’re socially awkward from our view...as to why they don’t...I don’t know, maybe they just need a bit more time” (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview).

Cultural difference in terms of hobbies and interests, but also in terms of humour, was raised as a persistent barrier to new international students forming natural friendships with Australian students. Ruogang noted that “Some of the stuff we may think is bullying but are just having fun with you. The culture is one of the differences I think” (Ruogang, male student, Phase 2 interview). Teachers, too, mentioned differences in humour amongst other preferences: “Sometimes I think the way the kids bond outside of the classroom is culturally different, so it’s around jokes, or if it’s around going out, or music, or things that they look at on Facebook or Instagram” (Abby, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview).

Personality factors

Personality factors also influenced the extent to which international students were successful in establishing new friendships. One student during Phase 1 showed optimism about the prospect of making Australian friends based on his own open and friendly attitude, sharing that “I think if they are friendly and I can be friend with them” (Longwei, male student, Phase 1 interview). During Phase 2, students attributed success in establishing friendships with Australian students to personality reasons, including an outgoing nature. Honghui noted that “I have a lot of Australian friends...not very difficult, but some people maybe...Maybe I like make more friends (laughing). Yeah, and

outside, outgoing” (Honghui, male student, Phase 2 interview). Junjie also credited an outgoing nature as a reason for his success in establishing friendships:

It's bit easy I think. [International students need to be] more outgoing, I think? 'Cause when I first arrived and students all interested in international student, you know? And they are happy to make friend with you. So I think maybe they don't want to make friend with Australia student, or bit shy? (Junjie, male student, Phase 2 interview)

Feedback from teachers also suggested that international students who have sufficient motivation to make friends with local students would find a way of doing so. Jenny shared that, in her experience, “kids that are strategic and pragmatic...they make friends with Aussies, there's no two ways about it” (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview). Another teacher told a story of an international student and previous school captain, who described his initial attempts to form friendships with Australian classmates as unsuccessful, but persevered:

[The student said] “I picked Aussie kids and I wouldn't know what they were talking about, but I would laugh when they laughed, and I would watch football on the weekend so I would have something to talk to them about.” He said “I realised after like, you know, three months they weren't laughing with me. They were laughing at me. So I went and found some other friends.” Like, he just wasn't daunted, he was so great. (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview)

Personality was also noted as a factor in overcoming any cultural differences to establish friendships. Yan described an intercultural friendship between Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Australian students all living in the same homestay, who were “just great mates” (Yan, female teacher, Phase 2 interview). Jenny also felt that personality factors were more influential than cultural factors:

So it's personality that's got a lot to do with it as well, hasn't it? No, you can't just say culture, the cultural differences, which are huge...but I don't think it's that...things like personality, age and background, there'd be a whole lot of variables that you'd have to look at. (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview)

Another teacher suggested that the increasing usage of social media is helpful in providing opportunities for international students to socialise with local students, as it can be a common interest. She explained that “things like Instagram and Facebook, social media, makes it a little bit easier for them as well on the other side... I think they can share something like that ...and make friends from there on” (Abby, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview).

Language barriers

Communication in English was identified as a factor that impacted on the successful establishment of new friendships in Australia. Phase 1 interview data revealed concern about difficulty communicating with Australian peers in English:

When we first arrive there we might, for most of us...we are talking to local students, we cannot really understand them because they speak really, really good English, but we are problems because no one will like to making friends with you if you cannot communicate with them. (Huizhen, female student, Phase 1 interview)

Language difficulties were again raised during Phase 2 as barriers to the establishment of friendships between Chinese students and their Australian classmates, with the exception of those who had very high levels of English. Yan noted that “we do have, like, a few really high-level students and they have friends all over the school...but you have to have, like, really good English level to, yeah, to make friends here” (Yan, female teacher, Phase 2 interview). Abby also described language as “a bit of a barrier to getting closer to those local students” (Abby, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview). Jenny suggested very high levels of fluency in English were needed in order to experience “comfort” in relationships with Australian students, because “you can’t be yourself in another language really unless you’re absolutely fluent” (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview). This student coordinator went on to describe her own difficulties establishing relationships in a second language, beyond surface level interactions:

I’ve had some experience when I lived overseas and was learning a language myself...I got to a certain stage in my conversations...but then to go into a bit more detail and depth...it was hard. Maybe language plateaus at that level, or it’s hard to break through to that next level. (Abby, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview)

One student contradicted the perceptions of the teachers and suggested that even though language fluency was an important issue, it could be overcome with a confident attitude. He identified that “a big question is (if) you can’t talk fluently properly, so they can’t...compare with Chinese students. I speak more confident with them...My friends encouraged to speak English and they don’t mind if I speak wrong” (Junjie, male student, Phase 2 interview).

The influence of other international students

Chinese students entering Australian secondary schools often study alongside classmates from their home country. Teachers spoke about the comfort international students often felt when able to socialise with friends from a similar cultural and linguistic background:

I used to do buddy systems. They don't work for us. The Chinese kids want to go back to speak Chinese at morning tea instead of be with their buddies. It's a very small group that use that as a way of making friends...We don't beat ourselves up about it anymore. (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview)

Peer pressure between international students was noted by teachers, who believed that international students were sometimes pressured to conform to cultural norms within friendships groups from their country of origin. Jenny mentioned that "kids from the city, from in Chinese cities, had a bit of an attitude towards kids that were from the country. So there was that sort of discrimination even within the culture" (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview). Also noted was pressure to conform to academic norms within the student group with Carol describing "a couple of students were there to work, but because of problems with communicating and interacting with other [Australian] students they end up with their own cohort, and then it's a case of being the tall poppy" (Carol, teacher, Phase 2 interview). Carol went on to explain that these students "were demotivated by the rest of the cohort, and also just sort of pulled down" (Carol, teacher, Phase 2 interview).

Discussion

This study investigated the expectations and experiences of making friends in Australia for Chinese international students studying in Australian secondary schools. Research questions investigated social aspects of students' study experience in Australia, including the extent to which students felt confident about making new friends, and the expected and experienced levels of difficulty in the establishment of these new friendships. The study also investigated expectations and experiences regarding whether new friendships in Australia comprised local and/or other international students, and the extent to which students were seeking to make Australian friends.

Analysis of questionnaire data revealed a decline in student confidence regarding establishing friendships after starting school in Australia. The establishment of new friendships in Australia was reported as being less difficult than expected, but the extent to which international students were successful in making friends specifically with Australian students did not often meet expectations. Difficulty entering already established friendship groups, cultural differences, personality factors, language barriers and the influence of other international students were all factors discussed in follow-up interviews as problematic in the establishment of friendships with Australian students, with a common interest in sport reported as an enabler of cross-cultural friendships. These results corroborate a growing body of research suggesting that international students experience significant barriers in their efforts to interact with local peers in Australia (Marginson et al., 2010; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016; Sawir et al., 2008).

International students are seeking interaction with Australian peers, but often experience less interaction than expected

A key finding of the current study is that although some friendships with Australian peers do develop, international students from China are not establishing friendships with local students to the extent that they had expected. Positive interactions with local students have been found to increase confidence (Vasilopoulos, 2016); however students in the current study experienced an overall decrease in confidence after commencing secondary school studies in Australia.

If we return to sociocultural theory to consider this phenomenon, the social context in which these student perceptions are being developed is significant. Attitudes towards making friends in Australia while students are still in China are co-constructed in a social context of peers also preparing for an international study sojourn, along with family and perhaps teachers also supporting these students for their transition. Once in Australia, meaning making is shaped by a changed sociocultural context where interactions with other international students, local peers and new teachers impact on the development of perceptions. That confidence is lower in this new context is an indicator that the establishment of friendships between local and international students is an area in which further support is required if the expectations of incoming international students are to be met.

Closed friendship groups of Australian peers restrict opportunities for interaction

An important issue raised in this study is that senior high school is the most common entry point for international students to commence studying in Australian secondary schools, but it is also a difficult time for these students to break into already established friendship groups (Arkoudis et al., 2020; Australian Education International, 2013). Similar experiences have also been documented previously in the tertiary sector, where friendships with international students are deemed “unnecessary” because local students already have established friendship groups and are not seeking to make additional friends (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016).

That 75% of students in Phase 2 of this study had established a mixture of friendships with both other international students and local Australian peers suggests that these friendships are possible. However, as a large proportion of these students were seeking to make more Australian friends, expectations in this area are not being met. Results from this study align with previous research suggesting international students with a more outgoing personality find it easier to establish friendships with Australian students (Arkoudis, Baik, et al., 2010; Arkoudis, Marginson, et al., 2010). International students who were “a bit shy” (Junjie, male student, Phase 2 interview) had more difficulty in their interactions with domestic peers, and may require additional support in facilitating these interactions. As student personalities continue to develop in this new sociocultural context, interactions with teachers and peers in supporting more introverted students to connect and contribute are particularly important. It is important to consider why some of these students may have felt

“a bit shy”, and the impact the cultural context may make on this characterisation of self. A Vygotskian perspective would suggest that people from diverse cultural backgrounds may frame how to interact in social situations differently from each other, including the extent to which speaking out in classrooms contexts is appropriate (Smagorinsky, 2007).

Cultural differences and similarities exist

Cultural differences were identified as a barrier to the establishment of friendships between domestic and international students. In particular, differences in humour were presented as one reason domestic students and international students did not automatically socialise together, supporting previous research that suggests students from different cultures tend to have different topics of conversation and senses of humour (Marginson et al., 2010). In particular, ‘in jokes’, whether deliberately targeted towards international students or simply a cultural norm amongst Australian teens, were noted as a cause of discomfort for international students in both the current study, and previously by Matthews and Sidhu (2005). This suggests that that widely accepted cultural norms related to “having fun” (Ruogang, male student, Phase 2 interview) in mainstream Australian society may be interpreted quite differently by students from different cultural perspectives. Also implied is a concept of a dominant mainstream Australian culture that fails to acknowledge the diversity of cultural backgrounds of domestic Australian students (Jones, 2017; Marangell et al., 2018; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005).

Sport, described by one teacher in the study as “ingrained in Australian culture” (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview), was noted as a common interest for some students that had enabled friendships between Australian and international students. Sport, along with other co-curricular clubs and societies, has been recognised as a way of providing meaningful, ongoing opportunities for local and international students to engage with each other around common interests (Marginson et al., 2010). Apart from sport, the current study did not identify any other common interests between international and local students that may assist in the establishment of friendships.

Emerging from this study and in the literature (Jones, 2017; Matthews & Sidhu, 2005), the establishment of friendships between local and international students challenges the concept of cultural over-generalisation, whereby students are assumed to share common characteristics based on nationality. This concept has been criticised as overly simplistic (Holliday, 1999; Jones, 2017) and also unhelpful by reinforcing the deficit model of international students as “needing to change, to learn new skills” (Leask, 2015, p. 92) in order to assimilate into the Australian social context. In contrast, a sociocultural perspective frames culture as created and recreated in “moment-to-moment interactions” (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 450). This lens provides opportunity for the constant co-construction of new culture in local contexts, as a product of the interactions between students from different backgrounds, should these interactions occur.

“You have to have, like, really good English level to, yeah, make friends here”

Difficulties communicating in English were identified as a major barrier to international students in the establishment of the desired relationships with English-speaking peers in this study, supporting previous studies identifying language competence as the key to enabling active agency in English-speaking environments (Australian Education International, 2013; Marginson et al., 2010).

While international students are required to meet minimum English language requirements prior to commencing their study in Australian schools, the findings of the current study support calls for the provision of comprehensive language support throughout a student's course of study (Marginson et al., 2010). Explicit instruction in the language components of core subjects has been suggested as a way of building the language skills of both domestic and international students (Arkoudis, 2006; Arkoudis, 2007; Schleppegrell & O'Hallaron, 2011), and scaffolded group work and discussion based around core content offer additional opportunities for interaction between these groups (Arkoudis, Marginson et al., 2010; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016).

Given the diversity of the language background of both domestic and international student cohorts in Australian secondary schools, opportunities for multilingual discussion may also assist in increasing interactions between students, building the foreign language skills of domestic students, and challenging the deficit view of international students in Australian schools (Rizvi, 2011; Rizvi & Beech, 2017; Tran & Pham, 2016).

Recommendations

Considering the potential barriers to the formation of friendships between local and international students, it is clear that intervention from schools is necessary to provide the environment and opportunities that may foster the development of these friendships (Arkoudis, Marginson, et al., 2010; McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016). Students and teachers in this, and previous studies, have been critical of “contrived” situations that produce forced and limited interactions (Campbell, 2012). The lack of success of these endeavours in producing any lasting connections has led some teachers to conclude that initiatives such as buddy systems “don't work for us” because “the Chinese kids want to go back to speak Chinese at morning tea instead of be with their buddies” (Jenny, female International Students Coordinator, Phase 2 interview). The large proportion of students in this study seeking to make more Australian friends contradicts the assertion that international students are not seeking to socialise with Australian peers.

This study concludes instead that sustained efforts should be made to bring these groups of students together in meaningful ways that focus on the commonalities between students. Buddy programs that are directly linked with course content have been trialled successfully in the tertiary sector (Amos & Rehorst, 2018; Campbell, 2012), and although limitations include the “forced” nature of the exchanges, the link with course content may provide a basis for more meaningful interactions and

“buy-in” from both local and international participants, particularly when structured so as to equalise power relations between both groups (Amos & Rehorst, 2018; Ranson, 2018).

It is recommended that opportunities for interaction between domestic and international students must be embedded within the core curriculum in order to be successful. Students spend the majority of their time at school in class, and it is in these classes that meaningful shared experiences are most likely to occur (Freeman & Li, 2019), with any subsequent friendships forming organically and voluntarily (McKenzie & Baldassar, 2016). Structures such as group work, with international and local students working together on subject-related tasks during classes have been found to encourage integration between students and also facilitate academic learning (Arkoudis, Marginson, et al., 2010; Freelan & Li, 2019), leading to satisfaction from both international students and their domestic peers and therefore providing the meaningful interactions that might spark genuine interest in cross-cultural exchange.

Asia, and Australia’s engagement with Asia, is a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020), that states development of “the knowledge, understanding and skills that make it possible to engage actively and effectively with the peoples of the Asia region” (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020) as a key concept in Australian schools. Although international students entering secondary schools are seeking to establish friendships with Australian students, local students with established social networks have been found to be unlikely to reciprocate without first undergoing “a process of personal transformation” (Sawir et al., 2008, p. 173), whereby they become more curious and open to the cultures, lives and values of their international peers. It is therefore recommended that Australian schools harness the potential of the Australian Curriculum to provide authentic and engaging learning experiences that engender curiosity about, and engagement with, international students from the Asian region.

It is suggested that further research be conducted with international students who are ‘less outgoing’ or ‘a bit shy’. Although these students were mentioned by participants in this study, their voices are under-represented in the data collected. It is perhaps the less confident students who require the most significant support in terms of intervention and change to existing practices in order to better facilitate the establishment of friendships during their studies in Australia as noted by others (Marginson et al., 2010; Yates & Wahid, 2013).

Further research into the applicability of social media platforms as opportunities for connection between international and local students, particularly during this time of restrictions to global mobility, is also recommended.

Conclusion

International students studying in Australian secondary schools are a unique, and vulnerable, group within the broader international student cohort in Australia. They are also a diverse group of individuals with a variety of backgrounds, personalities

and interests. Data from this study suggest that the expectations of international students regarding the establishment of friendships with Australian peers are not consistently being met within Australian secondary schools. This finding provides a challenge for schools to address the factors that inhibit the development of these friendships by focusing on the commonalities between students, both domestic and international.

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