

## Towards a framework for meeting the educational needs of Asian New Zealanders

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### **Introduction: the non-traditional immigrants**

During the decades of the 80s and 90s, profound changes in the global economy have generated an environment which facilitates the massive movement of people between nations. As the global economy becomes more integrated and communications between nations become easier and faster, transnational migration can be described as phenomenal. The current wave of immigrants is unlike that in earlier times. A key feature is the shift from the European to Asian countries as the principal source of migrants. In the major receiving countries like the United States, Canada and Australia, this means social and cultural diversity has become a reality.

The situation in New Zealand is no different from the other Western countries. Changes to the immigration policies in 1986 (Burke, 1996) and the subsequent changes in the 1990s have increased the number of Asian migrants coming into the country. The “new” immigrants from non-traditional sources are mainly Asians, with the majority from a Chinese background. This new immigration was conceptualised as part of the effort to bring investments and

skills into the country. The New Zealand economy was reported to have benefited from the resources and investments brought into the country by the business and professional migrants (Cremer & Ramasamy, 1996; Enterprise Auckland, 1996).

These rapid demographic changes are surely changing New Zealand into a more diverse society. This chapter begins with a brief summary of school statistics to show that the numerical increase in Asian immigrants is having a direct impact on the nation’s schools. It points out that addressing diversity in schools is an obligation under the various policy instruments. It then suggests some ways of meeting the educational needs of immigrant children. However, this process will require us to dispel several myths. The chapter concludes that there is an urgent need to understand the “new” Asian migration. And the best way to do it is to improve the current knowledge base by engaging in serious research on immigration and education.

### **Growth and diversity**

According to Statistics New Zealand (1998), the Asian population in New Zealand is expected to grow at a faster

rate than that of other ethnic groups in the country. The “Asian Population Projections” indicate that the Asian component of the nation’s population will almost double from an estimated number of 186,000 or 5% in June 1996 to 370,000 or 9% in 2016, an increase of 184,000 or 99%. The natural increase (births less deaths) will contribute 54% of this projected growth during 2000-16, and net migration the remaining 46%. The medium-term projection also indi-

cates that the number of Asian children aged 0-14 is expected to grow by 39,000 or 81% from 48,000 in 1996 to 87,000 in 2016. Besides immigration as the main contributor for growth, there is a built-in momentum, represented by a relatively young Asian population, which fuels the increase.

In terms of student population, by 2051 around a third of all children will be Pakeha, a third will be Maori, and 21.2% will be Pacific children. Asian

**Table 1: Number of students in schools at 1 July 2000 by ethnicity**

Ethnicity	1998	1999	2000	% of total
NZ European/European/Pakeha	473 761	473 112	468 002	64.1%
NZ Maori	144 403	144 738	146 913	20.1%
Samoa	26 874	27 074	27 677	3.8%
Cook Island Maori	8 337	8 703	8 937	1.2%
Tongan	9 443	9 953	10 463	1.4%
Niuean	3 482	3 483	3 609	0.5%
Fijian	1 821	1 914	2 114	0.3%
Tokelauan	754	983	1 185	0.2%
Other Pacific Islands	2 428	2 443	2 404	0.3%
<b>Pacific Subtotal</b>	<b>53 139</b>	<b>54 553</b>	<b>56 389</b>	<b>7.7%</b>
South East Asian	5 766	6 663	6 635	0.9%
Indian	9 485	9 970	10 750	1.5%
Chinese	13 645	14 138	13 636	1.9%
Other Asian	13 024	12 050	11 346	1.6%
<b>Asian Subtotal</b>	<b>41 920</b>	<b>42 821</b>	<b>42 367</b>	<b>5.8%</b>
Other	6 281	6 799	8 556	1.2%
Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Foreign Fee Paying	5 075	5 373	7 462	1.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>724 579</b>	<b>727 396</b>	<b>729 689</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education. (2000). *Education statistics news sheet*. December.

children will have increased to 11.2% (Education Review Office, 2000). This projection of growth continues an earlier trend from 1986 to 1996 where Pakeha students declined from 72.6 to 62.4%, Maori students increased from 20.5 to 24.5%, Pacific students from 5.6 to 7.6%, and Asian students increased dramatically from 1.7 to 5.0% (Education Review Office, 2000).

In the year 2000 student population figures show that Asian students formed 5.8% of the total student population, in comparison with 64.1% Europeans, 20.1% Maori and 7.7% Pacific Island students (Table 1). Among the Asians, Chinese students were the largest group followed by the Indians and Koreans respectively.

The sharp increase in the Asian student population is also having a regional impact, with Auckland as the key destination for the majority of Asian immigrant students, followed by Wellington and Christchurch respectively (Table 2).

These demographic changes signal that “immigration and education” are issues of importance that merit the attention of politicians, the policy community, academics and teachers. Stewart correctly says, “[t]he issues of immigration and education are inextricably entwined and should not be divorced in policy-making” (1993, p.231). Meeting the needs of a growing student population differentiated by language, culture

**Table 2: Asian immigrant students by location 1999**

	% of the city's school population
Auckland City	17
North Shore City	14
Manukau City	14
Wellington City	11
Waitakere City	9
Christchurch City	7

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Education. (1999). *New Zealand schools*, p.27.

and schooling experiences, and making a meaningful connection with the issues arising, requires an examination of the conceptual framework.

### The equity imperative

Theoretically, responsibility for ensuring equitable learning opportunities falls on the principals and teachers in the specific schools where immigrant families enrol their children. In reality, system-wide strategies to respond to migrants' educational and other needs are lacking. Educating immigrants is not a visible policy issue in New Zealand. The response to needs normally relies on the nature and circumstances surrounding specific events or issues. There is evidence to demonstrate that some schools were caught unprepared by the sudden influx of Asian immigrant students in the 1990s. The best example was the widely publicised case of Epsom Normal Primary School. On the pretext of a shortage of resources for immigrant

students, the Board of Trustees decided in January 1995 to amend its enrolment scheme by inserting a residency clause which, had it been adopted, could have given them the power to turn away non-English-speaking Chinese and other Asian immigrants. The Auckland Primary Principals' Association supported the move by encouraging other schools to do the same, until the Ministry of Education and the Immigrant Service agreed to pay for language classes for children aged between five and seven with no English (see Lau, 1996, for a more detailed analysis of this issue).

Throughout the exchanges between the various stakeholders, the discourses or arguments were framed in such a way as to advance a particular political position about immigrants from Asia rather than treating it as an educational issue. The school framed the issue around "inadequate funding" while the Asian community viewed it as discriminatory and racist. Anecdotal evidence and press reports at that time suggested that this had impaired the schooling climate for the immigrant children, not just in Epsom Normal but also in other schools.

It would be a serious infringement of immigrant children's rights to education if their entitlement were curtailed for reason of perceived "costs". Their guilt will be equally weighty if a suggestion is made that financial exigencies are not important when making educational

decisions, especially at a time when everyone has to do more with less. Rather, the intention is to point out that to consider excluding the children of immigrants from the social contract based on a transitory financial problem is contradictory to one of the basic tenets of public education, that is, equality of educational opportunity for all. The oft-quoted statement made by the late Right Honorable Peter Fraser as Minister of Education in 1939 is a useful working premise to guide the deliberation of educational issues concerning immigrants:

*The government's objective, broadly expressed is that every person, whatever his level of academic ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted and the fullest extent of his power.*

The current expression of this ideal is found in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF), which states:

*All young people in New Zealand have the right to gain, through the state schooling system, a broad, balanced education that prepares them for effective participation in society (Ministry of Education, 1993, p.5).*

On curriculum needs, one of the NZCF principles states:

*The school curriculum will encourage students to understand and respect the different cultures, which make up New*

*Zealand society. It will ensure that the experiences, cultural traditions, histories, and languages of all New Zealanders are recognised and valued. It will acknowledge ... New Zealand's relationship with the peoples of Asia... (ibid. p.7).*

The rights of Asian immigrants to equal educational opportunities are also enshrined in venerated documents like the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990, the Human Rights Act 1993, as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Clearly, the relationship between immigration and education stands on very strong legal and philosophical grounds. It is right to say that the Asian immigrant students and their parents have invested not only in what New Zealand has to offer in education, but also in the democratic principles of equity and educational opportunity for all. But there is a gap between perception and reality, and the issues relating to Asian immigrant students are not well understood.

## **Perception and reality – the three myths**

### **The homogeneity myth**

When examining educational issues concerning Asian students, there is a need to challenge the notion that Asians constitute a united bloc. The fact is the most recognisable feature of post-1986 immigrants from Asia has been its extraordinary diversity. In its publica-

tion, *Asian New Zealanders*, Statistics New Zealand (1995) lists at least 19 Asian countries from which these immigrants came.

It is equally important to note that Asian immigrants seldom identify themselves as Asians. More often than not, they identify with specific national identity or country of origin. For example, the Chinese from Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Peoples Republic of China (PRC) would identify themselves with their own countries. And there are marked differences between them: Malaysian Chinese have much more experience in living in a multicultural society; Hong Kong Chinese have experience of a democratic system of government under the British; and the Chinese from PRC have lived under a Communist regime for a period of time.

Also, Chinese immigrants manifest a new “diasporic” phenomenon not shared by others. This is broadly described as trans-Pacific commuters, with parents known as “astronauts” shuttling regularly between their home country (country of origin) and the host country, while their “parachute kids” are “dropped” off in the host country to pursue their education. Parachute kids are those living with one parent (usually the mother) in the host country or with both parents away from the host country (Pe-Pua et al., 1996). This phenomenon is well represented by immigrants from

Hong Kong and Taiwan. This “dual locality” has a strategic focus in that it gives the immigrants the “best of both worlds” or a safety net in the event of unfavourable circumstances in one of the countries.

Asian New Zealanders also vary markedly in their immigration experience. Immigrant descendants are defined as New Zealand-born children of New Zealand-born parents. They speak English and have already fully integrated into mainstream society. Recent immigrants are mainly professionals and business people in the middle-age groups who began entering the country in 1986 after changes were made to the immigration policy. The parents are overseas-born and their children could be born in New Zealand, or have been in the country for some time. Refugees are “involuntary migrants” who would have gone through a period of hardship prior to and after arriving in New Zealand.

Thus, the tendency to conceptualise Asian immigrants as a single, monolithic entity inevitably fails to identify inter- and intra-group differences and experiences. There is no such thing as a pan-Asian characteristic, and generally there is no pan-Asian educational issue.

### **The model minority myth**

The perception of Asian immigrants as a “model minority” is a problematic issue. Despite great diversity in their experi-

ences, stereotypes about academic achievement, economic success and strong work ethics are extended to all Asian students. The perception in the minds of many professionals and members of the general public is that Asian students are members of a model minority destined to excel. It is unusual to regard Asian students as at-risk students. But this can be a destructive myth. First, it divides the Asian community itself into two groups: those who fit into the model minority stereotype and those who do not make the grade. Secondly, it can be an invitation to inaction because of the perception that the Asian community can take care of itself. Thirdly, it can be used as a political tool against other minority groups. The reasoning goes like this: if Asian students can achieve success without much help, why can't other minority communities? The reality is that those who don't share the “model minority” label may have their educational needs overlooked, and may become victims of educational inequality in terms of policy attention, intervention and funding. Long term, this can become an “invisible” crisis.

### **The ESOL phenomenon**

Another unhelpful perception of Asian immigrant students is the belief that the problems encountered by them are basically an issue of English language deficiency. It is true that language deficiency is a temporary condition, and

many, after the initial language barriers have been overcome, can perform as well as mainstream students. However, such a narrow conception of the issue can easily bypass the social, economic, cultural, academic and personal issues that Asian immigrant students must confront in and outside school on a daily basis.

The ESOL phenomenon fails to appreciate that the problems involve more than simply remedial work; they are multi-dimensional and demand more than just learning English. Too often, such a linear conception of Asian immigrant students' problems can also lead to the responsibility of looking after them being placed solely at the doors of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department. ESOL teachers eventually end up taking on administrative, counselling and supporting functions that would normally be handled by professional staff for mainstream students. Such rigid compartmentalisation tends to isolate the ESOL department when, in actual fact, it should be cooperating with other subject teachers to ensure a smooth transition of ESOL students into the mainstream classes.

Diversity in schools is a reality. It is here that the "... fear of the native population and the hopes of the immigrants collide" (Stewart, 1993, p.13).

### **Addressing Asian immigrant needs in schools**

Traditionally speaking, schools in New Zealand operate under a limited view of Asian immigrants and students, and in a structure that does not easily accommodate their needs. In their study on promoting positive race relations in New Zealand schools, Donn & Schick point out that "[m]uch of the work related to race relations in New Zealand addresses issues about the Treaty of Waitangi, rather than the relationship among other ethnic groups in the country" (1995, p.29). Similarly, from the curriculum perspective, Wood points out that "[i]t is likely that the emphasis in the 1980s on biculturalism and New Zealand studies may have reduced the extent of Asian studies in the curriculum of many schools" (1994, p.56). The reality is that schools must be willing to stake a claim in the value of diversity. The successful adjustment of immigrant children depends to a large extent on the school's ability to help such children to overcome hurdles that exist in the school – such as unfamiliar sights and sounds, prejudices, differences in cultures and values, and new learning approaches. To effectively meet the needs of diverse student communities, schools must strengthen the system, and must conscientiously involve themselves in capacity building – in leadership, staffing, support services, school environment, resources and training. Some areas of

concern, though not necessarily an exhaustive list, are mentioned below:

- *School climate*

It is critically important to help schools to understand the nature of demographic changes in the schools and in the community. Boards of Trustees, principals/headmasters and teachers must cultivate a school climate for accepting diversity by frankly talking about cultural differences. Transforming schools into neutral, safe sites may generate the kind of atmosphere where students endeavour to engage others in an open and honest dialogue and regard differences as a positive thing rather than a threat. Pursuing this object would mean aligning school policy and demographic reality.

- *Curriculum*

The school curricula, teaching strategies, materials and texts should be mobilised to inculcate knowledge and understanding of the new immigrants. Some immigrants, the Chinese in particular, have a long history in New Zealand. The first organised group was reported to have arrived in the country in 1866. Their history is part of New Zealand as a nation and is worth studying. The current effort to infuse Asian content in schools, particularly in the language and social studies curriculum, is a notable effort.

- *Teachers*

Many teachers fear losing control in

multicultural classroom settings because the demand for multiple approaches and perspectives is imposing a disproportionate burden on their time, energy and ability. Immigrant students often place unfamiliar demands on teachers and may bring out teachers' lack of preparedness. So, any attempt to transform schools to reflect this multicultural reality must take cognisance of the fear teachers may have. Teachers' pre-service training must provide the professional skills, knowledge and disposition required to operate in this new social, cultural and pedagogical reality.

- *Non-teaching staff*

Very often, the initial contact with the school is with the non-teaching or para-professional staff of the school such as the secretary, admission officer, foreign student adviser or the counselling staff. They have an equally important role in creating and supporting a conducive learning environment. They must be fully trained in skills for intercultural interaction with immigrant students and their parents.

- *Asian educationists*

There is a pool of immigrant teachers and educationists who are rich in their cultural heritage and native tongues. Attempts must be made to use these unique human resources in schools through some carefully planned training programmes or refresher courses. This will also help bridge the



gap between the supply of teachers with Asian backgrounds and the numerical growth of Asian students.

- *Home-school partnership*

Parents must be enlisted to support their children's learning in schools. Schools must identify barriers to family involvement in their children's school, and establish critical links between the home and the school. Building mutual trust is vital. Parents need to be assured that they are welcome to discuss matters relating to their children's education and in a way that they can understand.

- *Working with the community*

Support from the community is essential. It is not uncommon to hear that the interests of mainstream children are being neglected. An extreme case would be the "white flight" scenario. It is important to discuss changes in one's school with the officials or representatives of community groups. It can allay fears and reduce the social distance between the immigrant and the local community.

The whole intention of any policy or programmes to empower Asian immigrant students and their families should be to scaffold their educational experience in a way that will progressively hand over the responsibility to them as they become "acclimatised" to the New Zealand educational environment. But they cannot maximise their educational potential if their educational experience

is shaped by tentativeness, ad-hocism, and assumptions unconfirmed by empirical data and analysis. The need for research-based understanding of the new challenge is indispensable.

### **Collaborative research needs**

In educational research and academic discourses in New Zealand, there appears to be scant reference to the historical or the contemporary experiences of Asian immigrant students in the New Zealand educational system. Generally, there is little formally documented information available on programmes and support that schools in New Zealand provide for non-English-speaking-background students (Kennedy & Dewar, 1997). This paucity of knowledge and information should spur the educational community to document, analyse and offer practical policy-oriented recommendations on educational issues concerning these students. The expansion of scholarly, policy and pedagogical attention on such issues is a must if a scholarly vacuum is to be avoided.

Improved data collection, analysis and dissemination can become the driving force for educational programmes, service and responsiveness to the Asian student population. Some recent efforts are worth mentioning. The *New Zealand Education Gazette* (15/7/1997) reported that "[c]hanges to data collection systems were made in 1994, and growth in the number of Asian students can

now be reported.” There was also an attempt to dis-aggregate Asian students into finer distinction by country of origin. This is a welcome development as it represents a genuine attempt to correct a serious weakness in analysing immigrant issues. That is, the paucity of reliable data. A publication *Non-English-speaking-background students – A handbook for schools* (Ministry of Education, 1999) was distributed to schools to support principals, Boards of Trustees, and school management in primary and secondary schools with suggestions for developing and implementing school-level programmes for non-English-speaking-background students.

There is a need to establish previously untapped partnerships in research and dissemination of information with multiple institutions. Inter-agency or institutional collaborative research between universities, colleges of education, schools, social service providers, government and non-government agencies is essential. Such research may be school-based, non-school-based, and/or school-linked types. A comprehensive study of this nature will require a multi-disciplinary framework transcending discipline and professional boundaries, and incorporating education, counselling, psychology, sociology, social work, public health, immigration and race relations. This kind of collaborative research not only ensures a balance in the conceptualisation of Asian student

issues, but might also provide a pathway to research which has theoretical and practical consequences. University-based research like that by Richardson (1994) and Cheung (2001) falls into this category. The contributors in this volume are also examples of a cross-disciplinary effort by Chinese professionals to make a modest attempt in pioneering a common research and advocacy agenda for the Chinese community.

### **Concluding remarks**

The population of Asian immigrants in New Zealand is predicted to increase. An inevitable trend will be the growth of overwhelmingly New Zealand-born students with immigrant parents. These demographic changes in schools are emerging as both immediate challenges and long-term issues for educationists and policy-makers. The impact is being keenly felt in the Auckland region in particular. One official of an Auckland educational organisation acknowledged the reality of schools today this way: “I am on the board of trustees for two schools, and it’s something that needs to be looked at a national level. We are a multicultural society” (*Western Leader*, 21/1/99). Therefore, immigration as a critical factor in policy-making in education cannot be left to chance. The obligation to make well-intentioned and comprehensive analyses to meet the needs of immigrant children is not a matter of choice. It has to be mandatory

and carefully thought-out. The “field” of immigration and education must grow in tandem with the growing numerical strength of the Asian immigrant community.

It is well recognised that Asian immigrant parents consider investing in their children’s education a prime consideration in their decision to migrate to New Zealand. This is a plus factor because research studies have shown that “strong family support” is a vital element of a “strong school”. In this regard, immigrant children and their parents enhance, rather than diminish, the vitality of New Zealand schools. All those, including counsellors, who have professional contact with them must capture the opportunity to tap into the energy that immigrant children bring to their education and their motivation to “make it” in their adopted country. The instrumental reason is that these immigrant children are the nation’s citizens and future. Their success will, in the long run, benefit New Zealand.

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