

プロジェクト報告

# “New Zealand is still learning to get along with itself”: tertiary students discuss New Zealand multiculturalism

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## Abstract

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the movement and relocation of peoples has become a norm in the global world. The causes for the human migration may vary from a simple desire to try a different life in a new environment, which can be described as a lifestyle migration, to political and economic or environmental migration. Migration can also involve fleeing military conflicts or genocide in an attempt to save one’s life, as affects millions of asylum seekers and refugees. Disregarding the reason for migration, millions of people find themselves living among ethnically and culturally diverse groups of people, which forces them to renegotiate, or at least to question, their own collective identity. This quest for identity involves equally those who have arrived in a new place, and members of the host society. This article discusses how the concept of multiculturalism manifests itself within the New Zealand context with a particular focus on education. The article is based on a pilot study of a group of students in one tertiary institution in New Zealand and their perceptions of multiculturalism in New Zealand.

The article starts with a brief introduction of the notion of multiculturalism. This is followed by a discussion of the (hi)story of migration to New Zealand and the development of a multicultural society. The third part of the article discusses perceptions of tertiary students about New Zealand multiculturalism.

## Defining multiculturalism in New Zealand context

Initially the relocation of people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed the pattern of migration set by the colonialism of previous centuries. People from colonies or ex colonies were driven to the metropole, or central homeland, of the empires located predominantly in Europe. The original thought was that the newcomers would be incorporated smoothly into the host society and adjust to the dominant collective and national culture. In countries like the USA, the UK and Canada, and later Australia and New Zealand, the assumption was that as the new comers had chosen to come to these countries, they would become Americans, Canadians or New Zealanders, leaving their culture, language and often religion behind. The concept of “Melting Pot” based on the idea of “white supremacy” was behind this thought. As in a melting pot where all ingredients melt together to form a “stew”, the new immigrants would melt or mould into desired citizens, who would leave their former culture behind.

Many people followed this route of assimilation willingly or unwillingly. However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s it became evident in many places around the world that immigrants wanted to maintain their original cultures, speak their languages and not necessarily assimilate with the dominant culture. Ien Ang describes this rejection of assimilation:

*Identity politics, in this regard, is a logical offshoot of the decline of assimilationism and its illusory promise of equality on the basis of a strived-for but never achieved sameness: the politics of identity relies quintessentially on the recognition and mobilizing of difference once the idea of sameness has proved unreachable. Claiming one's difference (from the mainstream or dominant national culture) and turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have never quite belonged, or have been made to feel that they do not quite belong in the West. (Ang, 2001, pp.11-12)*

Although Ang resided in Australia at the time of this publication, her argument is equally relevant to identity politics in New Zealand. New Zealand has a relatively long history as a settler society, with strong Anglocentric identifiers, formed initially

“New Zealand is still learning to get along with itself”: tertiary students discuss New Zealand multiculturalism in conjunction with the otherness of Maori in New Zealand. In the years since the Second World War, New Zealand’s racial and cultural makeup has shifted considerably; notions of biculturalism, although still used as a political discourse, began to disappear. After the Second World War New Zealand welcomed substantial numbers of migrants from many parts of the world, in particular Asia. In recent years, and in combination with existing complex racial and cultural groupings, this has led New Zealand to become culturally pluralist, or ‘multicultural’ using the government rhetoric.

New Zealand has a long history of migration. The first settlements in New Zealand were formed by Maori who arrived here about 700 years ago, followed five centuries later by Europeans. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 with Maori representatives, established New Zealand as a British colony. Colonial ideology promulgated white supremacy through exercising racism and ‘othering’ those who were ethnically and culturally different. In 1881 a poll tax £10 was introduced for Chinese nationals on their entry to New Zealand, and by 1896 it grew to £100 reflecting an anti-Chinese prejudice. This poll tax was abolished only in 1944 (Te Ara. The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand. p.3).

A small group of Indians, 181 in total, found their way to New Zealand before World War I (Ip & Leckie, 2011, p.225). This was the second ‘non-white’ group of immigrants to New Zealand. As members of the British Empire, Indians were supposed to be excluded from discrimination, however, in reality “occupational, social, and immigration discrimination against Asians continued in both urban and rural centres...” (Leckie, 1995, p.139)<sup>1</sup>. Similar to Chinese, Indians were discriminated against based on their ethnicity and skin colour, and their position as British imperial subjects did not make their life in New Zealand any easier. Such discrimination speaks to what amounted to an ethnically selective immigration policy. New Zealand immigration policy, although it never officially mentioned white supremacy, was very much based around the idea that “whiteness” was privileged and equated with “civilized”, “Christian” and “Western” (Rattansi, 2005, p.282).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the New Zealand government tried to protect its

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1) For the purposes of this paper people of Indian heritage are also classified as “Asian”, following British convention.

country from unwanted immigrants.

*After the 1920 Immigration Act, which excluded any 'unsuitable' immigrants, only people of British (including Irish) birth and parentage found it easy to get into New Zealand. Along with Australians, they were excused from needing a permit to live in the country. In the 1920s and 1930s immigrant ships [...] brought thousands of new arrivals, but they were almost all British.* (Ann Beaglehole, 'Immigration regulation - Immigration policy: overview'. In *Te Ara - the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*)

Rejecting cultural differences and "othering" of those who were not white and British added to the construction of the New Zealand cultural identity as "Better Britain"<sup>2)</sup>. James Belich argues that this "Better British" ideology dominated the discourse on construction of a collective New Zealand identity from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s (Belich, 2001). According to Belich New Zealanders felt "even more loyal and closely linked to Old Britain than other neo-Britains, but also that they were in some respects superior to Old Britons" (p.78). He metaphorically suggests that "New Zealanders asserted greater egalitarianism, ingenuity and self-reliance than Old Britons" (Ibid.).

The massive Jewish exodus from Nazi Germany and Europe in the 1930s created a dilemma for the New Zealand government. New Zealand's initial response to the possibility of Jewish refugees was blunt and in accordance with the unofficial policy of rejection of those who were not from Britain. Edwin Dudley Good, Comptroller of Customs in the mid-1930s, stated: "Non-Jewish applicants are regarded as a more suitable type of immigrant" (Quoted in Beaglehole, *A Small Price to Pay*, 1988, p. 16). Walter Nash, Minister of Customs in New Zealand's first Labour Government which took office in 1936, shared a similar view: "There is a major difficulty of absorbing these people in our cultural life without raising a feeling of antipathy to them" (Ibid). It is worthwhile to mention here that Jewish migrants were fitting into the category of refugees, as they were fleeing from military conflict in the hope of saving their

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2) For detailed analysis of constructing New Zealand cultural identity see, for example, Belich, J. (2001), *Paradise Reforged. A History of New Zealanders from the 1880s to the Year 2000*. Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, Belich, J. (2009) *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler revolution and the rise of the Anglo-world, 1783-1939*. Oxford University Press

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Finally, the international pressure caused by the Second World War impacted the New Zealand attitude toward immigrants and refugees. In 1944 New Zealand began to accept refugees in a formal way. The first group of “official” refugees included 800 Polish people (734 of whom were orphans and women) (New Zealand’s Refugee Sector, 2011, p.3). The initial thought was that they would return to Poland after the end of the war, but with the cold war developing in Europe, they were granted the right to permanently settle in New Zealand. The New Zealand public was adjusting to the idea of “other” on their shores, but the hope that the “others” would go home dominated public opinion. In 1945, towards the end of the war, the Auckland Star in a section on “In the Public Mind. Correspondents’ views”, published the letter of Martin Morris:

*Now that the war is almost at an end in Europe, cannot some arrangement be made to send all the foreign refugees back to their respective countries to help to build up those places again?..... When the Polish children whom we have here as guests return to Poland, cannot a large transport take Jewish and alien refugees back to Europe as well? It would be a great thing for our own fighting men if this could be done – and I cannot see why it cannot – and surely it’s up to us to see that it is. (Auckland Star, After the European War, 7 April, 1945).*

Public sentiments and New Zealand official immigration policy usually reinforced one another. The government was still selecting the refugees using “racial”, “ethnic”, or “cultural” criteria, giving priority to those who were similar to Pakeha New Zealanders as they could “assimilate” or “integrate” into a predominantly “white” society more easily. The concept of Melting Pot was still very relevant. Not surprisingly, until the end of the Second World War, New Zealand remained “one of the most ethnically homogeneous of all European settler societies” (Brooking & Rabel, 1995, p.36)

For 25 years after the end of the Second World War, New Zealand was able to favour a “traditional” immigration path favouring immigrants from the U.K. and a few north European countries. But during the 1970s New Zealand was challenged from outside and within. In 1973 with British entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), New Zealand felt the threat for its trade and economy. The

“British” identity of New Zealand and further ties with Britain were challenged. Further, the international developments including changes of political regimes in South East Asia, the Vietnam war, continuous decolonisation, changes in immigration policy that took place in Australia and Canada, and other Commonwealth countries, had a great impact on New Zealand and its immigration policy. In addition to these external challenges, Maori “renaissance” within New Zealand questioned New Zealand collective identity based around white British supremacy. Hence, New Zealand finally had to change its immigration policy to meet these new challenges, to bring a new labour force and to face the reality of a multicultural society.

Since the second half of the 1980s, New Zealand’s pro-immigration policies have attracted immigrants from across the world, and not just from Western Europe, as in previous decades. This has resulted in an ethnically and culturally diverse society especially in New Zealand’s largest city, Auckland. According to some researchers, Auckland boasts more cultural diversity than London or Sydney (Davidson & Dai, 2008; Spoonley, Gendall & Trlin, 2007). Immigrants from Asia now form the fourth largest ethnic group in New Zealand, with Chinese and Indians being the top two minorities in this group (Norohna & Papoutsaki, 2014, p. 17). In 1956 about 93% of New Zealanders identified themselves as European, but 50 years later in 2006, 67.6% identified as European with 14.6% as Māori, 6.9% as Pasifika, 9.2% as Asian and 0.9% Middle Eastern (Robie, 2009, p. 71). The 2013 Census revealed that 25.2% of the New Zealand resident population was born overseas (2013 Census). And the other significant factor is that in 2013, 31.6% of foreign born residents were born in Asia, outnumbering the 26.5% of the population who were born in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Ibid).

These numbers suggest that New Zealand has become multicultural in a very short period of time. Older generations of white New Zealanders still remember the predominant “white” immigration policy and the ideology that underpins it, a circumstance that provides a convenient context for ‘othering’ those who do not fit into the category of white New Zealanders. The presence of increasing numbers of newer generations, especially those born overseas, continues to challenge the image of what constitutes contemporary New Zealand and its collective identity. More complexity is also added by the context of New Zealand’s formal bicultural and bilingual policies (Maori and Pakeha, and Maori and English). The existence of a

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plurality of others complicates the on-the-ground reality of contemporary New Zealand identity formation.

As mentioned earlier in this article, Ang proposes that with failing to create a collective identity based on sameness, claiming differences became a powerful tool for those who never felt a sense of belonging to the dominant group of the society of their new home. Following this logic, we can propose that multiculturalism can be understood as a co-existence of many (or at least more than two) cultures and peoples within one space. This is usually the nation state, which allows different groups not to assimilate with the dominant culture but co-exist as different groups. In Ang’s words: “In this sense, multiculturalism takes the challenge of togetherness in difference seriously. It is multiculturalism’s assumed mode of sharing, however, which is problematic” (2001, p.14).

The problem, which Ang refers to, is that often by mechanically acknowledging ‘multiculturalism’ or “multicultural nation/state” we tend to organise society into neat “ethnic communities” which can be used to celebrate our cultural diversity. The happy image of such co-existence of different ethnic/cultural communities is often presented in a form of endless ethnic cultural festivals, shared ethnic food, ethnic markets and other events that are usually encouraged by the local authorities. This results in organised multiculturalism as described by Ang: “... multiculturalism is based on the fantasy that the social challenge of togetherness-in-difference can be addressed by reducing it to an image of living-apart-together” (Ibid. p.14). However, the voices of people who are still marginalised, stereotyped and discriminated based on the certain views influenced by the long lasting ideology of “othering” that is usually connected with our colonial past, often become lost in this choir of the celebratory official multiculturalism.

In the context of this discussion on multiculturalism in New Zealand, my next question is whether the young generation of New Zealanders has a chance to learn about multiculturalism as a part of the school curriculum. However, to begin with, what do they think about multiculturalism in New Zealand?

## New Zealand tertiary students discuss multiculturalism

The group of students who participated in the focus group/discussion consisted of

22 predominantly second year Bachelor of Communication students studying in a tertiary institution in Auckland, New Zealand. The group included five international students – two from the USA, one from China, one from India and one from Russia. Among local (New Zealand) students, one student was born in Tonga, one in the Solomon Islands, one in South Africa, one in Sweden and the rest were born in New Zealand. Three of these students identified themselves as Maori, two as Pacifica and the rest as Pakeha. In addition to the focus group session, all students completed a questionnaire that included questions about multiculturalism and biculturalism. They were also asked if New Zealand is a multicultural society and if they had an opportunity to discuss multiculturalism at school. (See Appendix 1 for the Questionnaire).

All students responded that they had not discussed the topic of multiculturalism during their school years in New Zealand or abroad. However, a few pointed out that there were some occasions when different cultures were acknowledged through a “celebration” or by creating a space for “others”. In the words of one local student:

*I went to a diverse high school. Though we operated systematically (Pakeha values) often we also engaged in Maori traditions like Powhiri and Kapa Haka - to honour important visitors and exchange students from Japan. Similarly, the school also provided a prayer room for Muslim students and a large variety of culture groups to account for the diversity present. The effort to accommodate for a range of cultural needs was not explicitly discussed but implied by the integration of multiculturalism in the culture of my high school.*

Another student, who grew up in Singapore, described her experience of multicultural education at her primary school in that country:

*In my primary school days (late 90s), in Singapore, every year we celebrated multicultural day by having a school concert/performance day - where children from different countries performed cultural dances, skits and songs. It was a celebration of the different races. I remember whilst living in Singapore, they had 3 different main ethnicities - Chinese, Indian and Malay. And so they tried to emphasize to children from a young age, that diversity was to be celebrated, and not dismissed.*

However, the most common response was that the students had never discussed

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multiculturalism as a concept at school in New Zealand:

*Never, I didn't really know we were a multicultural nation until I started University in 2012. But Aotearoa (New Zealand) was multicultural nation way before 2012...*

All students appreciated the opportunity to discuss the topic of multiculturalism during their tertiary study and commented that due to the multicultural environment of the institution and the city (Auckland) it helped them to position themselves in New Zealand society.

*XXX (name of the tertiary institution) is the first place I have talked about multiculturalism in a school environment.*

And another student:

*We discussed it during our Intercultural Communication class. A common understanding for me anyway – I was born overseas but grew up in New Zealand. I am a New Zealander. New Zealand is a multicultural country now.*

In the words of another international student:

*We discussed a lot about multiculturalism during our Intercultural Communication class at XXX (name of the tertiary institution). We have discussed about Chinese, Indian, Kiwi and Maori cultures... I started to understand New Zealand society better.*

The question whether New Zealand society is multicultural or bicultural stimulated a lively discussion during the focus groups, which was followed by detailed answers in the questionnaires. The students agreed that New Zealand is definitely a multicultural society and Auckland specifically is very multicultural. At the same time, a few students commented on the complexities of the concept of multiculturalism. In the words of one New Zealand student of Tongan decent:

*This is an extremely complex subject. Personally, I think 80% of New Zealanders are very ethnocentric. There is little common understanding of different life-walks, experiences, cultures and ethnicities. I think Aucklanders like to take part in cultural activities like the Chinese Lantern Festival, Polynesian Festival, Pasifika, Pride Parade etc. but, at the end of the day, prejudice and judgement will still exist in their homes. Negativity and stigma are still just as strong. New Zealanders will still complain about “Asian*

*drivers”, “Indian dairy owners”, “dumb South Aucklanders”.*

These words concur with Ang’s argument that celebrating cultural diversity can create a false image of the happy living-apart-together without addressing the complex issues that present themselves through prejudices, stereotypes and various forms of discrimination against certain ethnic groups in a multicultural society. In the words of another New Zealand student:

*I think New Zealand is multicultural largely in the descriptive sense. There are a lot of different ethnicities living in New Zealand but, I think, more could be done to accommodate them. I do think New Zealand is working on this to become normatively multicultural by providing ideologies and policies that promote diversity.*

The difficulties of defining multiculturalism were acknowledged by most of the students. As one of the New Zealand students suggested:

*I do not think that New Zealand is multicultural, I think it is a melting pot. Our laws don’ t allow for complete multiculturalism as some are archaic and others benefit the majority not the minority. I think New Zealand wants to be multicultural but it is in fact bicultural. I think this is who we are, Maori and Pakeha.*

The question whether New Zealand is bicultural or multicultural also came up regularly in the discussions. The same student explained:

*I think New Zealand is founded as a bicultural society as can be seen with the Treaty of Waitangi. Our laws reflect biculturalism. You cannot be multicultural and bicultural at the same time. As by definition they mean different things. I think New Zealand is confused on how it wants to present itself as it is trying to be both.*

This confusion of how New Zealand tries to present itself through official discourse as a bicultural society, when in reality it is multicultural, was noticed by every participant including local and international students. The traditional rhetoric about biculturalism started to vanish, but students also commented on unequal power relations that exist under the “umbrella” of biculturalism. According to one New Zealand student:

*I think New Zealand is a symbolically bi cultural country. I think that only in theory the treaty [of Waitangi] has secured equality and respect between*

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*Maori and the crown. Not a whole lot of things are being done for the Maori people, if we look back at NZ's history of colonization and the affects it had and is still having on the Maori people today it is clear to see they were not treated fairly and there were/are breaches of the treaty. Maori continue to be disadvantaged and discriminated against.*

This unfair treatment of Maori people and Maori culture including Maori language was discussed by all the students.

*As far as being bi-cultural, New Zealand owe it to the Maori to build back their stolen native language. Just as in the past, it was illegal to speak Te Reo Maori, it should be compulsory to learn Maori language in schools. New Zealand is definitely not a bi-cultural society. As much as Karakia, Powhiri and the Haka exist during official ceremony - New Zealand tends to hold on to things that make NZ look good but only superficially....*

*I think New Zealand is still learning to get along with itself.*

When talking about majority and minority groups in New Zealand the inequality between Maori and Pakeha was acknowledged again. In the words of an international student from the USA:

*I would suggest that Maori are the minority and Pakeha are the majority because they are the two main groups of people and in history or in my experience, white people or people from European descent tend to be the majority.*

And as described by a New Zealand student:

*Maori, Pakeha and Pacific Islanders are majority groups. Asian and Indian as majority groups among foreigners.*

There are three points in this short answer which are worth commenting on. The first is that the student separated Indians from the rest of “Asians”. However, there is no further explanation who these Asians may be. New Zealand became home to many “Asians” from the North East Asia as well as the South East Asia. In this answer they are all clustered in one group as Asian. And the third point is that the student automatically categorised “Indians and Asians” as foreigners, reinforcing the “us-other” dichotomy and ignoring the fact that some of these Asians could be living in a New Zealand for a few generations.

In the view of another student:

*Majority groups - white people (Pakeha), Maori (full or mixed Maori), Chinese people. Minority groups - Pasifika, Indians, Europeans, Afrikaans, Latin Americans, Americans, Canadians, Middle Easterners/Arabs etc*

Nearly all participants agreed that Pakeha are the majority group and not only in a numerical sense but in terms of its “privileged” position in New Zealand society.

In conclusion, this pilot study reveals that the concept of multiculturalism had not been discussed at school by all of the participants. However, a number of the students referred to the events in their school when different cultures were showcased and celebrated during school festivals. All participants emphasized the complexity of the concept of multiculturalism and also the existence of a certain confusion when defining multiculturalism and biculturalism. There was a general agreement that New Zealand society and especially Auckland are multicultural. However, the power struggle between Pakeha and Maori was noted on many occasions. All participants acknowledged the importance of discussing the topic of multiculturalism and commented that this experience helped them to position themselves in New Zealand society. This equally applied to the local and international students.

The final question is, where to from here? I conclude this article with two different comments that represent two different voices of young New Zealanders who participated in this study. The first voice:

*NZ may have diverse cultures but whether or not there is peace and understanding between these cultures, is a whole different subject. As more and more New Zealanders are completing tertiary education, the ‘natural’ occurrence of colloquial racism is building. Pacific Islanders and Maori are still racially discriminated against. I remember my Indian guy-mate being stopped in his Mercedes by a Police officer due to the fact that he was black, young and driving a nice car (so he must have stolen it, thought the officer). Racial profiling against my best-friend’s father during a neighbour-dispute resulted in her father’s lawyer treating him like a criminal from the get-go. “Just plead guilty” was the lawyer’s “advice” .*

*“Why should I plead guilty if I haven’t done anything wrong?” he asked.*

*These are not one-off experiences. I am constantly followed around stores because of my brown skin and tattoos. My younger “white” sister, never has*

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*those issues. It's bullshit. It's out-dated. And it really shouldn't exist in today's global access to information.*

The second voice:

*Although NZ is a bicultural society - from some things I've heard and read throughout my stay here since 2016....is that Maori people are still fighting for their place, still fighting to have voice in this country which they are supposedly one of the host cultures. I guess the level of equality between Maori and Pakeha is still unbalanced. But as an outsider, I do see that NZ does incorporate elements of the Maori traditions into different aspects of the Kiwi culture - Te Reo language at schools, public signs/labels/directions/warnings translated into Maori, the famous All Blacks haka, the national anthem sang in English & Maori, Maori television programmes, a Mara'e's role in the different universities around NZ etc....maybe they are small things in the scope of the bigger issues...but I think that's a start to reconciling the paths of NZ's bicultural dilemma.*

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## Appendix 1

Questions about your encounters with multiculturalism

1. What do you think is meant by the term 'multiculturalism'? How does it differ from 'biculturalism'?
2. Have you ever thought of/discussed multiculturalism at school?  
If you have had such an experience, do you remember on what occasion? What have you discussed exactly?
3. What do you think of New Zealand society today? Is it a multicultural society? Is it bicultural? Or is it something else? Explain your answer.  
If you came from another country would you describe this country as multicultural?  
How does it compare with New Zealand?
4. Can you identify minority and majority groups in New Zealand? (Or, who do you think are minority and majority in NZ? Name them and say why you identified these groups?)
5. In your view, are there any contradictions between describing New Zealand as a bicultural society and multicultural society. Explain your answer.

Your country of origin

Your age (optional)