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International students in the first years of senior secondary schooling in Australia: longing for belonging

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Most research on international students' experiences has focused on tertiary settings and consistently shows that this cohort negotiates significant risks during their time abroad. This paper draws on data from the first year of a three-year Australian Research Council funded study to address the un(der)examined cohort of young people who complete their secondary school education as international students and temporary sojourners in Australia. We analyse the data from the initial interviews undertaken with 60 Year 10 international students during their first year of the senior secondary schooling. Drawing upon the theoretical resources associated with the politics of belonging, we ask if, and in what ways, students felt themselves to be marked as 'other' to constructed educational and social norms. We note the significant role that online activity played in helping students deal with feelings of disconnect and exclusion.

Introduction

Research focused on international students' experiences has grown significantly in size and scope over the past two decades. Running through this theoretically varied literature is compelling data to demonstrate that, regardless of the kinds of educational successes students may (and often do) achieve, many describe their international educational experiences as

difficult, alienating and lonely (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Dumenden & English 2013; English 2012; Marginson et al., 2010; Saha & Karpinski, 2016; Sawir et al., 2008): a situation which sees these diverse individuals increasingly understood as a “vulnerable population” (Sherry, et al., 2010) who lack a sense of belonging.

Most of the extant research focusing on questions of belonging/not-belonging has been conducted with international students in universities or other post-compulsory settings. Yet in Australia and other major destination countries, such as Canada, the UK and the US, increasing numbers of international students attend secondary schools. In 2019 (DoE, 2019), there were 24,825 international school students in Australia’s government and non-government schools, with the largest sub-set of these students commencing their studies in year 10 at the start of senior secondary school.

The differences between international *school* students and international *university* students are multiple and varied, largely connected to issues of age. International secondary school students are under the age of 18 for most of the time that they study in Australia. They are legally and physically defined as minors. As such, they lack the legal rights and (in most cases) the financial independence to make many key decisions about their life. Adults’ rules govern where they live, how they dress, when, if and under what circumstances they can communicate with others, how/if/where they can engage in online activity, and to some extent, what they can eat, when they eat, and where they spend their time. Surveillance—in real life and online—is a routine feature of their lives. As a result, previous research that has focused on the experiences of adult learners is not necessarily best suited to increasingly our understanding of the needs of this younger, poorly understood group of learners. At the same time, however, if any of the issues

reported in the tertiary literature *do* relate to school-based students, then there is clearly the need for urgent and ongoing intervention.

This paper proceeds from the belief that more attention needs to be paid the specific experiences and diverse voices of international students in secondary school settings. Addressing the relative lack of research investigating the experiences and needs of secondary international students was the focus of Australian Research Council (ARC) funded research project *International Students in Secondary Schools (DP160103181)*. Conducted in Australia between 2016 and 2020, the project followed 60 international students who commenced senior secondary schooling (Year 10) in 2016/2017 through to the end of their secondary study (Year 12). In this unique, longitudinal study, we investigated students' experiences—be they face-to-face, online, within or beyond the boundaries of schooling—mapping how these experiences impacted upon wellbeing and belonging.

As the first in a series of papers that seeks to provide detailed insights into this group of students, this paper offers an initial reading of how students experienced their first year of senior secondary study; a crucial period in their overall educational journey. For most, this followed rapidly on arriving in Australia. Interviews from this first year of the study provide insights into the factors that appeared to be impacting their sense of connectedness and belonging. As our paper contributes to the knowledge base regarding international students broadly, and international high school students more specifically we begin with a brief overview of factors identified in the literature that appear to impact (positively or negatively) on international students' experiences. From this basis we can demonstrate the ways in which the paper offers new insights into this under-researched population.

Literature review and theoretical framework: a focus on belonging

The literature that relates to international education has been influenced by diverse theoretical traditions and followed multiple and overlapping lines of enquiry. Two have been particular significant in shaping the design and conduct of our research: longing versus belonging (desire versus reality); and the affordances of digital experiences.

Longing versus belonging

Research focused on international students has often identified the gap between what students hope to experience and/or achieve through international study and what they actually experience and/or achieve. Students have multiple and varied aspirations and motivations for studying internationally. These reasons include “the chance to explore a different culture, learn new ways of thinking and behaving, make new friends and improve cross-cultural knowledge and skills” (Sherry et al. 2010 p.). Many students study internationally so as to access and complete qualifications that may not have been available to them in their home environment (sometimes because of a competitive selection process) with the aim to establish, through this process, greater opportunities for post-school/post-university pathways. This can include pathways into employment—at home or internationally (Babacan, 2010; CACR, 2005) or pathways related to visa status and migration. Some international students desire to acquire what might be loosely described as markers of prestige—linguistic and cultural capital—valued by community and/or their parents and/or themselves (IDP Connect, 2019; Waters, 2005).

This literature also shows that, regardless of the motivations and expectations that sit behind students’ enrolment as international students, some factors have a consistent impact upon

students' experiences, satisfaction and, by extension, their sense of belonging. We review these influences briefly here, drawing attention to both potential risks to belonging and the absence of research that investigates this potential risk to high school students.

Language confidence and language competence

Two major issues impacting students' sense of belonging are language confidence and perceived language competence. Many studies report that university-aged international students see studying in an English-speaking country as a mechanism to improve their own language skills (Babacan et al, 2010; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). However, research has also shown that merely living in an English language speaking nation does not ensure language competence or learning success (Alharbi & Smith 2018; Ho et al 2007). Nor does experiencing English as the language of instruction automatically impact positively on learning the language. Having conducted a systematic review of research relating to this issue, Macaro et al. (2018) concluded that “the research evidence to date is insufficient to assert that EMI (English as the medium of instruction) benefits language learning nor that it is clearly detrimental to content learning” (p. 36). This is particularly relevant to the Australian context where most students experience English as the medium of instruction (Fenton-Smith et al., 2017).

Educational success is related to higher levels of English language skills and proficiency (Ho et al, 2007; Richardson & Rosalind, 2007). It is therefore not surprising that international students report a direct relationship between English language competence/confidence, academic progression and social integration – a situation which can challenge students' beliefs about their own academic giftedness (Alharbi & Smith, 2018).

Little is known about the ways international *secondary* school students experience language-based challenges. Only 11 papers within the past 10 years investigate English language challenges in relation to academic progress and social interactions of international high school students. Many secondary schools offer intensive language schools or language development programs before students can enter ‘mainstream’ classrooms and follow these transition programs with access to school-based support systems and tutors (Hendrickson, 2018). Based on focus groups with international senior secondary students from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Vietnam, English (2012) found an emphasis on writing, grammar and examinations in English classes in their home countries inadequately prepared students for spoken English communication with teachers and peers in Australian schools. She showed that students and teachers held different perceptions about aspects of student language competence. Australian teachers linked a lack of classroom participation by international students to what they perceived as an *unwillingness* on the part of the students; the students themselves cited their inadequate spoken English proficiency as a barrier. This finding points to a theme that runs across much of the broader international student literature in tertiary and school settings: the potential for students’ struggles with language to be read in ways that misunderstand or misrepresent their behaviours, and which reproduce narrow and limiting understandings of their skills and commitment. Dumenden & English (2013) referred to such students as *fish out of water* due to the mismatch between their current expectations and previous educational environments. They recommended more research into the “everyday lives of individual [international] students in mainstream schools” (p. 1078).

Friendships

There is a gap between international students' hopes and realities with regard to friendship. Tertiary students studying abroad often identify the desire to develop new friends and connections as a motivating factor in their choice to study abroad (Wong, 2017). Friendships bring a sense of connectedness and have a positive impact upon the quality of an international students' overall experience, including their sense of wellbeing (CACR, 2005; Sakurai et al, 2010) and, we argue, belonging. Direct contact with local students that encourages interaction has also been found to reduce prejudice (Cao et al, 2018). Sadly, however, research also documents that expectations of international students in developing extensive friendship networks with local students are often not met (CACR, 2005; Gomes, 2015; Harvey et al, 2017). Much of the research literature divides international student friendship groups into three categories: people from their home nation, fellow international students from nations other than their own, and locals (Gomes, 2015; Lin et al, 2011; Sakurai et al, 2010). While these can be overlapping categories, it is often found that international students are likely to maintain existing friendships (with people in their home country), or to form relationships with other international students, even from nations quite different from their own, rather than make any meaningful connection with local students (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). In fact, research has found they rarely make any meaningful contact with local students (Collins, 2006; Sakurai et al, 2010).

While limited research has investigated this phenomenon among international students in secondary school settings, it suggests that friendships could be challenging for this group as well. Despite the fact that secondary school students are routinely embedded in classes together, Matthews (2002) refers to 'parallel streams of noncommunication' (p.377) exemplifying intercultural interactions in Australian public secondary schools, because international students mostly interact with other international students while having minimal contact with local peers. It has been argued that the 'ESL student' label, often attached to international secondary

students, contributes to the stereotype among local students that international students “cannot speak English, and are hard to communicate or make friends with” (Cheng & Yang, 2019, p.565). Given these difficulties to connect with domestic students, it is hardly surprising that international students turn to peers who share a similar language. Thus, while English is a conduit to foster academic communication and intercultural interactions in English-speaking classrooms, international secondary students’ use of mother-tongue to interact with co-national peers allows them to maintain social attachment among their home social circles. For example, in a Canadian context, speaking Mandarin maintained a sense of ‘Chinese cohesiveness’ (Wu, 2020). In this way, boundaries between ‘the local’ and ‘the international’ students are carefully maintained, and students’ desires for alternative interactions produce little in the way of change.

Social isolation; and emotional health and wellbeing

A third, related theme in the literature on tertiary international students concerns experiences of social isolation, and concomitant problems associated with mental health and wellbeing (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Anderson & Graham, 2016; Sawir et al, 2008). The literature foregrounds experiences of alienation, loneliness, isolation, sadness and disconnect (ibid). These experiences are often linked to cultural and social differences between domestic students and international students (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Nguyen & Peterson, 1993; Saha & Karpinski, 2016), but international university students often blame themselves for their isolation, which they attribute to their limited English language skills (CACR, 2005; Richardson & Rosalind, 2007). The problems that result can be compounded by students’ inability or reluctance to seek help (Sherry et al., 2010). Students often admit to being unable to discuss the difficulties they are facing with their family (Ho et al., 2007) and while some institutions have implemented programmes to encourage international students to engage with counselling services, these can remain

underused, seen by students as only being suitable for those with severe problems, and perceived as culturally alien to the students, or understood as being an admission of failure (Popadiuk, 2010).

Living digitally as an international student

Another major theme identified in the literature, but unexamined for secondary international students, is the effect of digital connections on experience and how this impacts their sense of be/longing. A large body of research exists exploring the online behaviours of adolescents and teenagers, including literature concerning the positive and negative dimensions of online connectivity (e.g., Ito et al, 2010; Third et al, 2017; Commonsense Media, 2018). This research indicates ways in which online interactions, connections and behaviours *can* (but do not necessarily) generate a sense of belonging or community, highlighting both the risks and opportunities associated with digitally mediated interaction.

One oft-cited ‘positive’ of online communication for tertiary international students is a sense that, regardless of their present location, they can remain connected to pre-existing relationships with their families and friends at home (Saha & Karpinski, 2016; Sawir et al, 2008), thereby helping them to manage their thoughts and emotions (Harvey et al., 2017). This is particularly important since for this cohort, rates of access to and use of social networks is correlated with higher levels of wellbeing. For example, Wu (2018) found easy access to online spaces, such as *QQ* and *WeChat*, enabled Chinese secondary students in Canada to connect with their families and friends back home as instantly and regularly as they wished, while also using *Facebook* to interact with teachers, peers and local people in Canada.

Other research indicates online spaces can be experienced as places of alienation, discrimination or exclusion. For international students, this occurs in ‘public’ online spaces associated with media articles—especially if containing negative portrayals of international students (Paltridge, et al., 2013; Yi & Jung, 2015) but also in the less public, or provisionally private spaces accessed by students. In these constantly accessible environments, rates and forms of interactions, posts, comments and reactions can communicate clear messages about who is valued or who belongs, messages that can be overtly or covertly discriminatory, including cases of ‘everyday racism’ (Martin, 2018).

Thus—and in common with all students—for tertiary international students, online activity is complex and has the potential to impact variously on students whose construct ideas of ‘home’ and ‘place’ can be ‘fragmented, deterritorialized and syncretic’ (Martin & Rizvi, 2014, p.1016). This nuanced insight into the realities of online worlds that are often reified and demonised suggests the need for further investigation into the online activity of international high school students and how such activity can exacerbate or ameliorate such challenges or indeed create new and different risks and opportunities.

Theoretical framework: the politics of belonging

The word ‘belonging’ is woven through much of the literature that explores international students’ experiences but is, in Probyn’s (1996) words, a term with broad ‘conceptual reach’ (p.5). It is commonly used in combination with other descriptors (for example: acceptance, wellbeing, connectedness) when researchers investigate the extent to which students feel a sense of comfort, or acceptance (May, 2011) in a place that is not their official ‘home’. Related discussions (commonly influenced by the ontological perspectives associated with psychology)

often position belonging as a basic human need; a need that can only be met if we feel welcome, included, respected, valued, safe, supported and secure (Guyotte et al., 2019). In this tradition, researchers have reported tertiary international students desire “a sense of belonging through integration with the local community” that doesn’t conflict with existing “social, cultural and religious identities” (Gomes & Tran, 2017, p. 286).

The concept of belonging is also referenced by researchers operating from a more hermeneutic basis, highlighting the emotional and ontological difficulties of maintaining continuity of the self (Marginson et al., 2010) while in a state of literal, metaphorical and symbolic movement: an issue clearly central to international education. Researchers aligned with critical theory and sociology have drawn attention to the way tertiary international students negotiate a sense of self at the intersection of multiple and competing discourses: such as, ‘us’, ‘them’, ‘here’, ‘home’, ‘local’, ‘global’ and so on. Here the concept of belonging is used to raise questions of identity and subjectivity, including how this identity work “is produced beyond ethnic or national boundaries” and “contested on interrelated sites, scales, and networks” (Youkhana, 2015, p. 14).

Yuval-Davis (2011) uses the term ‘the politics of belonging’ to signify a belief that belonging is not just, or only, a feeling located in an individual, but is also a public, shared, discursive process through which boundaries that relate to self, identity and community are constructed and maintained. She writes: “Specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behaviour, are crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity narratives and constructions of attachment” (p. 15). Building on this work, Sumsion and Wong (2011) have argued that the construction and contestation of belonging can be made visible by attending to three interconnected political dimensions, or axes: Categorisation, performativity, and desire and resistance. Categorisation relates to what Crowley

(1999) calls the 'dirty work' of boundary maintenance. These are processes/experiences, policies/interpretations that communicate to individuals and groups (directly, or indirectly), powerful beliefs about "who/what belongs". Categorisation can produce forms of performativity within which individuals take up (and appear to accept) the positions assigned to them by dominant discourse. In other words, they may be found "enacting ...subject positions with their implicit power relations and categories of belonging, rather than contesting them" (p. 35). Processes of categorisation and performances of identity intersect with desire and resistance. People can desire a sense of belonging (and a destabilisation/dismantling of existing social orders and dominant discourses) even as they are excluded or minoritized. This desire may give rise to acts of resistance during which individuals or groups contest practices of exclusion even within situations where people appear to be performing the role assigned to them by dominant discourse.

Belonging, from this perspective, is always potentially in flux: constructed by the meanings we make of our experiences, and how other actors in our worlds seek to impose meanings upon our bodies. In the analysis that follows, we draw upon the concept of belonging to ask questions about the experiences of international high school students, and how, or in what ways, they are positioned to see themselves as insiders, outsiders (or both) and how this positioning changes in face-to-face and online contexts. Like Anthias (2006; 2008) we recognise the growing complexity of forms of otherness that emerge through consideration of "translocational positionalities" (p.5) and do not presume to know in advance how these students will have experienced their first year as a senior secondary student. Nor do we seek to present any individual student's experiences as representative of the student group in general, or students of a particular country-of-origin more particularly. Rather, our goal is to identify themes that occur and recur across the interviews, which warrant further and ongoing attention.

About the research project

The project investigated international secondary students' experiences of belonging and how, and in what ways, feelings changed over time and varied from context to context (including face-to-face and online environments). As part of our analysis, we identified the extent to which these students reported experiences similar to or different from those of other widely researched groups, including tertiary international students, secondary students or teenagers. Our primary focus, however, was on developing detailed and nuanced understandings of our particular cohort that could be used to shape mechanisms for supporting similar students into the future.

Project design and data collection

The *International Students in High Schools* project collected data between 2016 and 2019 from schools located in two Australian states: 5 in Victoria and 3 in Queensland. The schools selected were all located in metropolitan areas (the areas with the highest numbers of international students), and involved a mix of government (n=4) and private schools (n=4): a mixture designed to maximise diversity of participants. All schools had an international student population sufficiently large to protect the anonymity of participants.

Data collection took multiple forms including:

- Single interviews with school principals and/or international coordinators (2016 & 2017)
- Annual interviews with 60 international students (2016/17-2019). All of the participants were in year 10 at the time of their first interview and the majority had arrived in Australia in the previous 12 months. These students all volunteered to participate after

receiving briefing sessions at their school; verbal and written consent was provided by the students themselves and written consent was given by the students' parents/legal guardians. Participating students came from 15 countries, with the largest group coming from China (not including Taiwan and Hong Kong)

- Annual focus groups with (the same) small groups of domestic students (across 2016/17-2019). The domestic students were in the same year level as the international students: thus year 10 in 2017 and year 12 in 2019
- Annual interviews and/or focus groups with small groups of teachers
- An online survey of international students in schools across Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales (2019)

All interviews were conducted in secure and private locations on the relevant school sites, within school hours (or within after-hours times requested by students in one boarding school). All data was de-identified.

While subsequent papers will report on insights made possible by the longitudinal nature of the project and engage with different sets of data, this paper focuses specifically and exclusively on the first year of interviews conducted with student participants: the year they first enter upper secondary school. This focus is a deliberate choice to listen to the voices of students. Like Youkhana, we recognise that developing new understandings of belonging necessitates focusing on the “entanglements, interfaces and crosslinks of different regimes of belonging” that “assemble in certain locations and situations” (Youkhana, 2015, p.16). We therefore believe it important to focus in detail on one particular period in our participants' lives regardless of how things might shift or change into the future. The design of our research project offers us a unique opportunity to report upon experiences of *social ordering and 'othering'* navigated by a large cohort of students (n=60) – experiences that appear to transcend traditional boundaries

associated with country of origin, current school location, language or gender—and thus to generate the kind of new knowledge needed to better inform policy, practice and understanding.

Data analysis

Analysis of the first year of interview data was cyclical and iterative (Saldaña 2016) taking place over a 5-month period. The coding process involved both deductive (*a priori*) and inductive (emergent) codes. The literature motivated us to explore the extent to which school students were experiencing similar issues to their older counterparts, but also opened up unexpected issues around youthful friendships. The data analysis for the interviews involved four phases.

Phase 1 began with a simple coding chart looking for ‘good experiences’, ‘bad experiences’ and ‘online experiences, either good or bad’ (all in relation to wellbeing and belonging). Phase 2 delved more deeply into the nature of these good/bad/online experiences. It began with reflection on the extent to which major influences on the belonging of tertiary students were also found in the high school students’ responses. In order to ensure that our findings were not constrained by themes in existing literature we revisited the data, in phase 3, to search for factors impacting on belonging that may not have been featured in other studies. This led to the addition of multiple new codes specifically relating to students’ connections with home/home friends; out of school activities; lifestyle experiences and range/nature of online activities. In the fourth and final round of coding we revisited the data using theoretical concepts associated with the politics of belonging, linking positive and negative experiences associated with all of our major themes to three theoretical interests: moments of categorisation/othering; instances of desire/resistance; and spaces/places of performativity/compliance, noting that the same student comment could be an example of one, two or three of these concepts. This approach allowed us to develop a complex,

detailed mapping of the transcripts. We note, however, that coding was targeted, but not exhaustive, and we did not code every line of every transcript.

In the discussion that follows, we draw upon this coded interview data and the politics of belonging to provide new and original insight into the experiences shared by diverse international secondary students at one very specific point in an educational/life journey. We focus on students' self-reported desires as they start their senior secondary educational journey in year 10; processes and events associated with categorisation/othering through which students appear to be constructed as foreign to an asserted domestic student 'norm'; and the ways in which online spaces reinforced or resisted face-to-face experience. In presenting evidence to support our interpretations we offer a minimum of three quotes to illustrate each major thematic claim; and where possible have selected quotes from students from different countries. We note that the large number of participants makes it impossible to provide a detailed picture of each individual's context or backgrounds and focus, instead, on highlighting recurring themes. However, to indicate our respect for the individuals at the heart of our research, for each quote we provide a student's culturally appropriate pseudonym and the country they identified as home. We provide this data not to suggest that any individual student should be taken as a representative voice for their age, gender or country of origin, but rather to demonstrate the recurring nature of the issues that are spoken about, and the need for further, nuanced research into experiences of belonging. We also note that all students interviewed had satisfied the English language requirements for entry into their chosen schools, even though, as the grammar and syntax revealed in the quotations will show, the actual level of confidence and competence varies markedly within the cohort. As part of our commitment to validating the experiences and voices of these students, we have transcribed the interviews verbatim.

Longing for belonging: international secondary students' hopes and desires relating to international study

In their first interview students provided a number of reasons for studying in Australia. Many of these reflected very specific desires for educational and social opportunities they believed would not be available to them in their home country. We draw attention to the ways in which they focused on the differences between their home and host country, and their desire to be accepted in a new, different environment. Most expressed the belief that studying in Australia would connect them to what was consistently described not only as a good, but 'better' education:

Australia has a very good education system An (Vietnam)

My family and I think the education in Australia is better than China. Xiaomi (China)

The education is going to be so much better here. Bitna (Korea)

Some students linked the general claim that Australian education was 'better' to beliefs about teacher quality or the connections students could make:

My parents ...think like they have better education skills here, the teachers can help us go through any course and they have better degrees, better qualifications. Ranariddh (Cambodia)

Teachers are well more trained and just like a lot more opportunities here in Australia than in Papua New Guinea. Tahlia (Papua New Guinea)

I was kind of like tired of Korean school. Like I want to learn something new. And I didn't think that the education was that good out there. Bitna (Korea)

Frequently, the decision to study in Australia was linked to the belief that the Australian system would be less demanding and stressful than those previously experienced; and this would mean they would be more academically successful within their new, international, school context:

In Hong Kong, education and sports are most important for students. Over here we feel like much more relaxed. Kai Ming (Hong Kong)

My parents thought you'd get better opportunities out here in Australia. It's not as hard working in school. It's relaxed so you don't have to work long hours at night to do homework but you can just... like have enough sleep as important, like it's important you sleep well as a teenager. Chia-Hao (China)

I passed the test to go to year 10 in school in Vietnam and it was like the education in Vietnam is very hard so I couldn't catch up... I couldn't keep up, and my mum she gave me a second chance to come to Australia to redeem myself. Duy (Vietnam)

These students' motivations are consistent with previous research that indicates that the desire to escape from academic pressure and standardised tests is common to many international students (e.g., Wu et al., 2018)

For nearly all of this cohort, motives were connected to imagined post-school futures. They expressed the belief that their Australian school experience would help them secure access to

competitive courses and highly ranked universities, either in Australia or internationally, to directly improve their post-school career prospects:

Because you know China has... if you want, got your very good university you need to work really hard and if I go to Australia I can go to a very good university even better than the top university in China. Mingmei (China)

I think I can get a job as a doctor if I try hard or a teacher or something but I want to have a better future that I can take care of my parents.... Oh I think about Monash and Victoria University, some good university in Australia. An (Vietnam)

so of course I want to get 90 plus for my VC test, I want to go to Melbourne University and study if not Medicine, Commerce, then I would study for like 2 or 3 years and get a job here. Ranariddh (Cambodia)

Students' reasons for studying internationally communicate their acceptance of the idea that to access desired futures they need to spend many years living and studying away from home. Sending teenagers to study overseas is an increasingly common familial strategy of Asian parents to enhance their children's opportunities to get into higher education, which is extremely competitive in China and India particularly, and to gain social networks that might benefit them later (Wu, 2020).

Students also believed their chosen destination offered new experiences while being safe, welcoming and friendly:

I want to learn more about experience and learn more about the type of the children in the other country so I can switch... like experience between them and me. And I want to learn what is the different between our country and Australia, and how it feel when I live away from my parents Chhay (Cambodia)

Because Australia have good [weather] and friendly neighbourhood. This is very important Jiao-long (China)

the third reason that people come to here is... the people are really friendly here and once you get here you feel comfortable Galina (Russia)

Conceptualising belonging as *constant movement*, Probyn notes that “the desire to belong always [places] us on the outside, in a place of longing” (Stratigos et al. 2014 p. 178). The students in our study had a clear desire to access, be included within, and benefit from, an international educational experience, despite the obvious demands this would make. In the next section we consider experiences that sit alongside (and could easily undermine) the pursuit of these dreams. Our specific focus is on the ways in which students experienced themselves as ‘other’ to their local counterparts: lacking in terms of English language competence and undesirable as friends.

Categorised as ‘other’: international secondary students’ experiences on the margin

Yuval-Davis (2011) and Sumsion and Wong (2011) describe categorisation as the processes through which individuals come to know who/what belongs in a particular site, at a particular time. It relates to the construction and maintenance of boundaries, and the ways in which a sense of us/them and we/they is constructed. Reflecting upon their experiences at the start of their

senior secondary school journey, the students provided insights into numerous ways in which they were marked as ‘other’ to Australia’s ‘good student’ norms. The first, and perhaps most predictable, relates to language confidence and language competence. Many students had studied English for much of their lives (“basically starting from kindergarten” – Ling, China; “I studied English from a young age” Vithu, Cambodia). All had achieved a level of English language competence deemed appropriate for the entry into ‘mainstream’ year 10 classes, for example, in Victoria this requires an IELTS test score of 5.5 or having been taught in a school where English is the primary language of instruction for 2 years. Many students in this study undertook time in an English language centre prior to entering the mainstream. Nevertheless, such preparation did not alleviate significant difficulties associated with studying (and being taught) in English in Australia, difficulties with the clear potential to disrupt their plans.

Lacking in both confidence and competence in the English language had diverse consequences:

Sometimes in class I can't understand the teacher said some things and I'm afraid talk to the local student. Xiaomi (China)

They gave me homework write an essay of one thousand words about the subject I didn't know, it's difficult. Duy (Vietnam)

The Australian accent can be hard to understand sometimes. Not used to the accent here. Ranariddh (Indonesia)

I dropped history and geography because history was kind of hard because everything is in English and also I don't like science like chemistry or biology, like all the terminologies you need to learn in English. Yenay (China)

In these and similar comments we see that the ‘better’ education system students have entered does not eliminate the myriad of challenges associated with learning in an additional language. Students quickly become aware of school, subject and language norms – and that it is up to them to match these norms – not the other way round. Students felt othered and not belonging due to the language issues they faced, having been placed in a different ‘category’ of need. In the words of Yuval-Davis, students became aware of powerful “social divisions” (2006, p. 201). We argue that rendering these divisions visible is a crucial first step in the formulation of any response.

Friendship and connections

As with international students in university contexts, the school students hoped their international study would afford them new experiences, new connections, and new understandings of an unfamiliar context, as well as friends (Tran & Nguyen, 2016). For example, Chhay (Cambodia) said he came to Australia to “learn more about the ... children in (an)other country”. Importantly, all the participant schools had many initiatives in place to support the transition of their international learners: these included buddy systems, dedicated international coordinators, camps, etc. However, at the level of everyday social interaction outside the classroom, many of our high school participants reported that they experienced multi-faceted difficulties in their attempts to make friends with local Australians: experiences of what Sumsion & Wong (2011) describe as “we/they demarcations” (p. 32). In some instances, they linked this to their English language proficiency:

...when I first got here I think the problem is within myself, like every time when I recall it it's like I don't talk to people and then people don't talk to me so it feels like I'm being left out and then isolated from everyone else. Dishi (China)

I really don't talk to with someone really deep, maybe just fairly communication, joking, this kind of thing, that is fine, but it's like when you really sit down or really want to think deep or talk deep, communicate deep, there's no one here. Aoi (Japan)

There is no point to talk to someone if they don't speak English well... when you are speaking really well to do it. It's hard to break in Lian (Taiwan)

Statagious et al (2014) have argued that “although belonging and connectedness may co-exist, it is also possible for one to exist without the other—to be connected to a group or organisation but not feel that you belong” (p. 177). Being physically present did not necessarily mean being included, with international students remaining powerfully aware of a “gulf to be crossed” (Crisp 2010, p. 125 cited in Strategios et al., 2014, p. 177).

Significantly, of the 60 international students interviewed in their first year, over half felt it was left to them to initiate friendships, to bridge the gulf. Students spoke regularly about the negative feelings (and self-blame) that flowed from a lack of confidence. Aoi (Japan), for example, reported her lack of confidence with English means she “feels like they're going to judge me.” Tahlia (PNG) believed that “everyone was really nice...it was me, I was pretty much shy”. And in a similarly self-critical manner:

When I first got here I think the problem is within myself, like every time when I recall it it's like I don't talk to people and then people don't talk to me, so it feels like I'm being left out and then isolated from everyone else. Dingbang (China).

These feelings of exclusion and otherness are not only tied to their own experiences with language, but informed the way they come to feel “valued and judged” (Yuval-Davis, 2006 p. 203). Experiences of being judged led to an awareness of “identity and categorical boundaries” (Yuval-Davis, 2006 p. 203).

In addition to seeing themselves as different to their domestic counterpart, students also struggled with a sense of similarity to, and difference from, other international secondary students. Some students saw themselves as ‘naturally’ suited to friendships with international peers, with a “minimum common ground” (Yuval-Davis 2006, p. 207) including a shared language and shared experiences of being an outsider:

making friends with international students is a bit easier because you come from different countries, so you share together. Ponleak (Cambodia)

[International friends] make me feel that I’m not completely lost and alone in Australia.
Mittapheap (Cambodia)

For others however, pursuing this common ground can undermine the pursuit of other desires:

it’s kind of meaningless to come here and then only hang out with international students.
Bitna (Vietnam)

Some felt that there was a difference between the ways in which Asian and non-Asian students were regarded by local students:

I feel like when French kids and the Russian kids go ... over to mainstream, the local students would be more like welcome and they actually get curious. 'Oh, what's Russia like?' Mui Mui (Hong Kong).

This suggests that ethno-racial factors and Eurocentricism are at play.

Stratigios et al., (2014) remind us that “belonging may have no meaning or value unless there are some who do not belong” (p. 178). In the comments quoted above, we are alerted to the potential for one person’s experience of belonging to be another person’s experience of exclusion. We also see some evidence that students may draw upon familiar, relatively essentialist understandings of identity and culture to explain their sense of disconnect. For example,

Sometimes the ways of thinking of Australian people and Chinese people are different.

Nuwa (China)

We have something different with our mind. Sying (China)

It's still hard to be friends with them (local students) 'cause we have different cultures and my nationalities, my interests, and how I speak, like I speak like an Asian. Not like local students. Lian (Taiwan)

Students may find themselves reproducing stories of identity and culture that reflect the kind of ethno-racial fundamentalism that ultimately constructs and maintains so-called ‘natural’ ethnic boundaries (Yuval Davis et al. 2005 p. 516).

To summarise, students reported clearly visible experiences of being marked as ‘other’ to mainstream norms associated with language, culture, behaviour and friendships. Regardless of how they explained or justified their experiences, experiences of disconnect (of not belonging) produced powerful emotional reactions:

There are times when I just want to give up and go back to my country. Galina (Russia)

(When asked about where he felt safe) *I think nowhere* Shufen (China)

(Responding to the question where or when do you feel the most happy and relaxed?)

When I'm alone Fala (Hong Kong)

Our study indicates that there are, indeed, genuine reasons to be concerned about the wellbeing of these students, for most, their first year at a new Australian school is a challenging and often lonely experience. In the next section of the data analysis, we reflect on the extent to which online spaces provided affordances for new ways of connecting with friends and family.

Online spaces: sites of connection or sites of exclusion?

Research (e.g., ACMA, 2016; Common Sense, 2018) reveals a mixed picture of connection/disconnection, and positive and negative online experience for teenagers in the 13-17 years age group. This would seem particularly true for students transitioning into a new school in a new country. Does social media provide them with opportunities to maintain a sense of

connectedness to others when mobile? The US based Commonsense Media (2018) report: *Social Media, Social Life: Teens Reveal their Experiences*, for example, found “a complex picture”:

...on the one hand, teens feel social media strengthens their relationships with friends and family, provides them with an important avenue for self-expression, and makes them feel less lonely and more connected. At the same time, teens acknowledge that social media can detract from face-to-face communication and make them feel left out or ‘less than’ their peers. (p.iii)

First, for our interviewees, as for students more broadly, these technologies and social media were an important, if unremarked, part of their everyday lives (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 2001; Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Marlowe et al, 2016; Third et al. 2017). Our year 10 cohort reported spending significant time interacting with family and friends via technologies. Students reported regular, significant use of online apps and social media with 53 of the 60 students interviewed making consistent use of at least one of the many social media apps. They relied strongly on applications such as *WeChat*, *WhatsApp*, *Snapchat*, and *Instagram*, or upon more interactive platforms, such as, *Viber*, *Facetime* or *Facebook*, to keep in touch with families and friends. The choice of platform, timing and activity varied according to audience and purpose, with choices reflecting the place of both family and friends in students’ lives, at a time when young people characteristically are pushing boundaries and reaching out to others – strangers as well as friends (Poyntz, 2013).

These activities took various forms and played different roles, with the potential for online activity to generate an increased sense of belonging through facilitation of contact and connection with family and friends.

Online and family

We noted above that belonging exists only when considered alongside exclusion (not-belonging) and that we can experience a sense of belonging when we feel a sense of sameness. This is clearly seen in student comments that illustrate that online activity clearly played a vital role in helping students stay connected to key figures of ‘sameness’: their families. Contact with parents and close family via technology provided a mix of support, connection and reassurance:

my mum she’s so cute. After school every day she would just wait until I finished school, 3.30, and text me right away, did you just finish school. Are you going home now, are you hungry, what are you doing tonight, she will do that and it really helps a lot. Bitna (Korea)

We call. He always call me almost every day Ponleak (Cambodia)

I really listen to their voice everyday... we do call. Use We Chat social media. And I think is every day. Bao (China)

Contact with familiar, ‘safe’ people was not only frequent: it had a significant impact on the nature and quality of family relationships. Many reported feeling closer to their family now they were overseas, than they had at home:

I’m much closer with my family after I came to Australia because I miss them more than I did when I was in boarding school last year. Nuwa (China)

I think there's nothing changed except their love for me is even stronger than before. An
(Vietnam)

I think our relationship improved because we are distant from each other and it makes us
thinking of each other. Phala (Cambodia)

For these students, online activity plays an important role in helping to maintain and improve relationships by providing connectedness and co-presence across distance (Baldassar et al, 2016). Contact facilitated by the internet allowed students to 'be' with their family; to be part of a 'natural' community that they did not need to negotiate entry. In times of need, however, digital connection could not replace physical contact:

Yeah sometimes you might feel not entirely at home or comfortable sometimes and you just
want your parents to be there, they're not, but it's hard, you make the decision to come here
and you know you're not going to be here all the time, but when you're down you want
someone really close. Chia-Hao (China)

Parents... give you born... they give you courage to [come to] Melbourne... you got wifi you
can talk on the phone... you can meet kind of, but you can't have a hug. Shing (China)

We have a really good family relationship, so we care about each other and we love each
other, we kiss each other, so yeah that's parent. Aoi (Japan)

Such comments reveal the potential for digital spaces to provide a significant experience of belonging, and an associated sense of safety. Similar potential is found in analysis relating to friendships.

Online and friendships

Consistent with research into digital media use amongst young people of ethnic minorities living in otherwise foreign communities (Marlowe et al, 2017), keeping in touch with friends from their home country, or those whom they had met at earlier stages in their lives, was a major part of their online activities. Such virtual contact provided an important counter to loneliness and isolation, and a sense of connection and belonging often missing in the physical world of Australia and their school.

In some cases, the online connection facilitated face-to-face gatherings, however, students more commonly reported using social media and online platforms to organise ‘virtual’ get togethers, often centred around opportunities to play various online games. This was an important means of lessening students sense of outsidership, loneliness and isolation. It helped them feel less disconnected from family and friends back home, it provided a sense of belonging and satisfaction in being part of a group. For Mittapheap, playing online games with his pre-Australia friends:

make me feel that I'm not completely lost and alone in Australia. Sometimes I can connect with them through social media and make me less homesick for Cambodia and yeah, get along with my friends better Mittapheap (Cambodia)

For Basuki (Indonesia), it provided an avenue for broader contact –

We Skype. Jokes and gaming together still. Basuki (Indonesia)

For others, videogames provided a workable strategy for building new relationships, but as the quotes below indicate, these were often friendships with people outside their schooling worlds:

I play with Internet friends. They are more friendly than some people in schools Lian
(Taiwan)

I started online games when I came to Australia...I saw a game on Facebook, clicked on live stream, feel great, invite him, and asked about the game. He teaches me the game he downloaded for me and play together. Tien (Vietnam)

This is not to say that students did not use games to connect with their school peers. Some students, particularly those in dormitory accommodation, intentionally played video games with others physically co-located as part of their socialization scheme. There was also considerable satisfaction in just playing together, enjoying the closeness and effectiveness brought about through working in a team:

We work as a team to achieve victory. That's all we work together. Duy (Vietnam).

We don't care which country you are from and we are just team mates, we play together, with team work to do. Jun (China)

Video games helped like we connected a lot online with my school friends. Maybe we became friends is also computer games. When we each found out we all played the same one we just kept playing it together and then we helped each other with homework. Basuki (Indonesia)

The politics of belonging draws attention to the potential for individuals to experience and to transgress boundaries that construct ‘us’ and ‘them’. The examples provided here indicate the ways in which gaming facilitated this transgression. This echoes findings from other studies. For example, in his study of tertiary international students, Wong (2017a) found that for these students, new media and being “always on” created new possibilities, such as a type of “ambient hanging out” that might reduce “feelings of loneliness and sadness” (p. 120). The activities described by our students suggest that international high school students may take similar comfort from their online networks. But read together these quotes provide a picture of students’ online activity as multi-faceted and complicated. On the one hand, they display an awareness that they feel less alone when connected with friends-outside-Australia or recently acquired online-only friends which could potentially reinforce the belief that they are *not* part of friendship groups within their school. This may be particularly the case when students play games that *could* be shared online with friends, but may not be experienced that way. As Duy (Vietnam) commented: “I very alone when I play games. Minecraft the most. And sometimes I play the Total War.” On the other hand, the ubiquity of online connections amongst teenage communities can render meaningless the borders that exist between ‘school us’ and ‘school others’ by creating rhizomatic connections between students and countries separated by formal and physical boundaries.

Students did not adopt an uncritical or naïve position on social media and other forms of electronically mediated communication. They recognised, for example, the difference between

being added to someone's *Facebook* page as a 'friend' or being followed or 'liked' via *Instagram* and a genuine friendship:

In my social media, I just have some friends I know and some... I have some online friends but it's just my best friends they introduce me and I can talk with them. Sying (China)

People have four hundred friends on Facebook. Like they can't chat to all of them, just put them there and see what's going on to them Dingbang (China)

Students did not represent online spaces as automatically safe.

I'm quite cautious about meeting people online 'cause you don't know if their intentions and made a similar point saying. Ling (China)

If you make friends online it's a bit scary 'cause you don't actually know who they actually say they are. Ida (Singapore)

To summarise, for many students, social media played an important role in helping them feel connected with friends and family back home, and as such, countered feelings of exclusion and disconnectedness to some degree. For some, online gaming enabled them to build friendship groups and strengthen their sense of competence, acceptance and agency, while for others it underlined their sense of isolation and withdrawal. Online activity has the potential to facilitate student' sense of belonging, but not always.

Conclusion

This paper provides foundational and original insight into the experiences of 60 international secondary students at the start of senior secondary schooling in 8 Australian schools in Queensland and Victoria. It has shown that these students negotiate significant risks to their sense of belonging that require urgent and ongoing attention. These risks are connected (but not limited) to issues relating to language confidence and competence; how that impeded making friends; as well as access to family support. Such students could become *disconnected* from their study—and from their teachers and peers—with lack of English language proficiency actively creating and/or exacerbating this. The need for English language proficiency can disempower newly arrived multilingual international students in the early stages of enhancing their English language capability. Many had studied English in their home country for much of their life and felt prepared for their Australian experience, but this was challenged by their early experience in Australian schools, impacting their longing to make friendship connections because of fraught intercultural communication.

Online activities offered the potential to provide experiences of connection (and belonging), but did not ‘cancel out’ experiences of alienation or otherness. Rather, the student experience reveals specific evidence of a complex set of “entanglements, interfaces, and crosslinks of different regimes of belonging” that “assemble in certain locations and situations” (Youkhana, 2015, p. 16). This longitudinal study will ultimately provide further analysis of how the students’ sense of belonging changed over the three years of their senior secondary school study. In this paper we emphasise that the social divisions experienced by our project participants in Year 10 had a powerful impact upon their sense of self and academic competence and this needs to be more closely attended to by schools and education systems. Making the international student experience more visible offers educators working with this vulnerable population a means to

ensure that Australian schools, teachers and domestic students can help transcend the gap international students feel between feelings of longing and belonging.

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