

Diversity and Wellbeing at School

Report for participating Secondary School

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About the report

This paper summarises the findings of a small, in-depth research project undertaken at [School]; it has been prepared for the purpose of feeding back findings to the school. The findings are primarily based on the analysis of 12 transcripts of individual interviews and group discussions with Year 13 students and their teachers. The research also included observations and a social network survey. The participants responded articulately, and quotes from the interviews feature extensively in this analysis. Future writings on this project, aimed at a wider audience, will not refer to the school by name.

The study is part of the CaDDANZ research programme funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. More information about the CaDDANZ research programme can be found at www.caddanz.org.nz

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Executive summary

“Diversity and Wellbeing at [School]” reports on a small in-depth study of how students and teachers at [School] engaged with diversity. The findings in this report are based primarily on 12 individual and group interviews with Year 13 students and teachers; also, a Year 13 social network questionnaire, a Year 13 Senior Sociology assignment, and classroom and recess observations. The data was collected between May and November 2016.

Students’ friendships were the most important element identified in successfully engaging with difference and diversity at [School]. Genuine friends made each other feel safe to be themselves, and be able to be different without worrying about fitting in. The other side of the friendship coin is cliquiness, and students saw the friendship groups as tending to be fixed and closed to outsiders. Nevertheless, sports and other activities provided valuable opportunities to find new friends.

The learning environment itself was instrumental in successfully engaging with diversity and making students feel included. Key aspects of the learning environment that were identified in the research as contributing to successful engagement included:

- Teachers supporting their students as individuals
- Providing a balanced and inclusive curriculum that made minority groups visible and exposed students to a wide range of opinions and ideas
- Celebrating success and diversity.

It was clear from interviews and observations that teachers took the challenges and opportunities of diversity seriously. They sought ways to help students to bond and to explore the diversity around them. The Senior Sociology assignment “Is [School] a Fair and Harmonious Society?” was a case in point. The class members each chose a minority group of students to research, based on ethnicity or any other area of difference, and explored with those students how they felt about the fairness and harmony they experienced at [School]. The findings were generally positive. Furthermore, after doing the research, the class members were expected to identify some social action that could be undertaken to improve the situation for the group they studied.

The school took in a relatively small population of International Students, deliberately so, in order to make sure that the school was adequately resourced to support them, and the International Students were able to mix with local students and feel part of the school. There was a comprehensive programme for teaching refugee and new migrant students, aimed at integrating them into the school and helping them to join mainstream classes as soon as appropriate. The Home—School Partnership was aimed at making refugee and migrant students feel like they belonged and tried to draw in their families as well.

The school’s physical environment also played a part in shaping engagement with diversity, partly through the limitations set by ongoing construction, but also as the setting in which students socialised. The fact that the school’s campus was under construction was a challenge to crafting an interesting environment, when much of what could be done would be necessarily of a temporary nature. The students engaged strongly with the physical environment as they searched for, claimed and defended, spaces on campus in which to socialise with their friendship groups on a regular basis. The common room was a particular resource for the Year 13 students: warm, large enough to contain spaces for multiple friendship groups, and appointed with a kitchen and comfortable seating.

While students and teachers were very positive about [School], several suggestions for improvement were put forward by the research participants, and more emerged from analysis of the data. These suggestions were mainly about expanding or enhancing already existing aspects of [School]'s culture, such as programmes aimed at wellbeing, school values, celebration of diversity, Māori learning, and the support of teachers. Other concerns, about workloads and teacher turnover, related to the wider educational and social environment. Specifically, the suggestions were:

- To expand the Tuakana—Teina programme to include more Year 13 Tuakana or even Tuakana from additional Year groups
- To expand health classes to additional year groups, and tailor them to age needs
- To make the school values a living document and more actively incorporated into the life of the school
- To make the school environment better reflect the diversity of its people
- To further incorporate Māori culture into the curriculum
- To include celebration of African cultures
- To have teachers take a stronger stand in monitoring and managing verbal bullying in class
- To look out for students who were isolated and without a friendship network to support them
- To display greater sensitivity to the use of pronouns appropriate to students' gender identities
- To better balance class time so that it was not disproportionately devoted to misbehaving or unmotivated students
- To reduce workloads for better work—life balance and greater wellbeing
- To address the high turnover of science teachers.

Most of the suggestions for improvement can be seen to reflect the positive assessment of [School]'s culture made by the research participants. In particular, the programmes and policies aimed at wellbeing were valued and appreciated, students and staff enjoyed the diversity of the people at [School] and wanted that diversity reflected in the physical environment, and there was a positive relationship between students and teachers, such that students looked to their teachers as their primary resource for enhancing their classroom environment.

1. Introduction

This study is part of the CaDDANZ (Capturing the Diversity Dividend of Aotearoa/New Zealand) research programme funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.¹ As part of the wider CaDDANZ Project, the Schools Project investigates how school policies and practices concerning diversity impact students' sense of belonging and wellbeing in school environments characterised by ethno-linguistic and other forms of diversity.

Schools are called upon to help young people understand their world and the people around them in order to produce a peaceful society and productive citizens. The research at [School] investigated how school policies and culture shaped students' experiences and understandings of diversity, as well as their sense of belonging and wellbeing in a diverse secondary school – where among the school's approximately one thousand students, there were 75 nationalities represented and 40 languages spoken.

The focus of the research at [School] was on how the school engaged with difference and diversity in the classroom and in the campus as a whole. The challenges and successes of engaging with this diversity were explored with both staff members and students. The participants discussed the ways in which students were encouraged to explore the diversity around them, the school's culture, and the wellbeing policies and practices that were put into place to support [School]'s students. Participants also discussed the issues of dealing with a campus under construction and the stresses of a changing educational and social environment, and made some recommendations for changes they would like to see going forward.

¹ More information about the CaDDANZ research programme can be found at www.caddanz.org.

2. Methodology

At [School], Year 13 students and their teachers were offered the opportunity to participate in this research project.

The teachers who were asked to participate were those who taught Year 13 or worked with international, refugee and new migrant students. Five teachers volunteered, and were interviewed individually about the school's policies aimed at wellbeing and how they engaged with diversity in the classroom. Two of the teachers had particular insight into the situation of international, refugee and new migrant students, and this was a further focus of their interviews.

In addition to the individual teacher interviews, a group of teachers attended a presentation on the findings of an assignment for the Senior Sociology class, "Is [School] a Fair and Harmonious Society?" At the end of the presentation, the teachers discussed the findings, and explored issues relating to diversity and wellbeing at [School]. The CaDDANZ researcher attended the presentation and discussion, and drew on them for this research. The CaDDANZ research project contributed to the assignment by providing instruction on several social research methods to the Senior Sociology class to help prepare the students to do their research assignment. Attending and teaching Senior Sociology classes also provided the CaDDANZ researcher with some awareness of the new "Google classroom" approach.

The Year 13 students were asked by their Ako² teachers to respond to a questionnaire. This happened in their Ako classes, and the teacher then administered the questionnaire during the class. In the questionnaire they were asked to list the students they spent their free time with at school. They were also asked to describe their own ethnic and language background and the activities they undertook with the students they listed. Of the approximately 200 Year 13 students at the school, over half responded. Their lists were compared to identify consistent networks, that is, networks of three or more students with a high proportion of mutually identified links. Twenty of these networks were identified, containing three to 15 members. Ten networks were selected to provide a range of ethnic composition and size. Members from each were invited by email to an individual interview. The interviews covered:

- How they socialised at school
- The physical space in which they socialised
- The salience of culture and diversity to their networks
- What made them feel included and excluded at school
- What they would change about their school if they could
- Their opinions about the school's "Bring your own device" (laptops, tablets, phones) policy

Five students were interviewed. They were invited to bring their friends to a group interview, and one group interview (with six students) resulted, which focused on challenges they identified at school and their strategies to address these challenges.

² The Ako class is similar to form room, but incorporating wellbeing-related content, such as work—life balance.

3. Engaging with difference and diversity in the school

The teachers and students in this study gave the impression that they felt, overall, that the diversity of the students, including ethnic diversity and other types of diversity, was well integrated into [School]. The school's reputation for diversity was seen as a good thing, and the challenges and opportunities of diversity were acknowledged. The perceived inclusive nature of the school environment allowed one student to state with confidence: "We don't really tolerate any sort of racial discrimination".

I think one of the strengths of this school is the diversity. We have the gender diversity, we have the racial diversity, we have the social diversity, we have girls who are techie and into that sort of thing, we have the girls that are sporty, we have the girls that are into makeup, we've got the girls who are into reading. We've got the whole lot and there's space for everyone and I think it's okay to be different here. That's definitely my experience. [teacher]

Some students argued that ethnic differences were not that salient at [School], and rather taken for granted until events brought them to the fore, often providing opportunities for learning more about their peers' cultural backgrounds.

I guess it's just when we have like Māori Language Week or Pacific – obviously they'll teach us stuff and they'll know what they're on about, because they live in that culture. It's only when we really have those sorts of occasions where you notice there are differences really.

In the Indian culture, there was a week recently where my friend couldn't eat meat just because it was a religious thing, so we had a bit of a talk about that, [I] just wanted to know what it was about, who does it, and they often invite us to the Indian festivals as well. So it's kind of you get a different taste of the culture. I wouldn't have been able to experience most of that without having these friends. [student]

The only time when diversity was acknowledged to be an issue was in Year 9, which students consistently looked back on as a hard time when they were trying to fit in with others at the school. Students described Year 9 as difficult because it was a time when students were finding people to be friends with, and until that happened they could feel very lonely and excluded.

At my age now [in Year 13] it's not very commonly seen because I think people have just kind of grown up ... but you look at the Junior school and that's when I think a lot of people have problems with exclusion. People just get very "oh, I have to fit into this group", or you have to feel like this or like that, and it's where you mainly see it, ... from Year 9. [student]

The importance of friendships will be discussed more fully below, along with other ways in which the school encouraged students to feel included. These will be followed by a discussion of the aspects of the learning environment that influence feeling included; ways in which teachers encourage and enable students to engage with diversity; and areas of the school culture that could be enhanced to better support students feeling included.

3.1 The challenges and opportunities of diversity

Teachers reflected on [School]'s reputation for diversity, discussing it in its broadest sense, to include such differences as ethnicity, class, gender-related issues, and opinions. Overall, teachers and students were very positive about the way in which the school engaged with diversity. Some thought that staff and students could go further in exploring "the challenges and opportunities" of diversity.

People always say “diversity” as if it is a positive thing. Like, “Tell me, what do you know about [School]?” “Oh it’s very diverse!” So? And? We could be very diverse and all hate each other and stab each other in the toilets. [laughter] We reflect – we’re zoned and we have a lot of social housing in our zone, which I think is a good thing and it brings us a diverse community. That doesn’t mean we do anything good with it. I think we do. And the general temperature of the school is good. People mingle along and get along ok, but I think we could do more to enhance, not the diversity, but the understanding of the challenges and opportunities that diversity brings. [teacher]

When teachers reflected on diversity at [School], they also appreciated it as an opportunity to learn to compromise and to accommodate cultural differences.

The challenges are that when you have quite different beliefs, that strike you as what one person is doing does not fit with my normal, it does not fit with my good, then do we all just have to agree to do completely different things that we find unacceptable, or can we find a common ground? That can be a real challenge. For example, we are a state school and when I first came here the main block had a prayer room, which I thought was surprising for a state school, and then I heard it was for the Muslims students and I thought well that’s quite good, because if you are a strict Muslim you need to pray at certain times. But then that might conflict. Someone might say, “Well in that case I’m going to set up a Christian prayer group” and that can create real problems, right? So that is a challenge. The opportunity from that challenge is that you can hopefully build a common ground, learn from each other, accept some kind of point in the middle where you can meet and talk with each other, not giving up your culture. And allow that cultural stuff to filter in and inform the middle, and not lose it. Ok, you’re at school, culture is irrelevant, we’re all the same – we don’t want that. So it’s tricky, it involves compromises, it involves maybe having funny things like having prayer rooms in a state school. One thinks that’s ok. [teacher]

The point was made that the school values were salient in this context, and should be a living document, and more integrated into the everyday activities of school life.

3.2 Identified successes in engaging with difference and diversity

Participants agreed that [School] was keen to celebrate and engage with diversity. In praising [School]’s inclusivity, teachers and students identified several ways in which the school successfully engaged with and promoted diversity. These included school celebrations of success and diversity; the importance of friendships; and involvement in school clubs and sports. The programmes for refugee and new migrant students and International Students were aimed at integrating them into the school, and were described as successful. In particular, the Home—School Partnership tried to engage the parents of the refugee and migrant students.

Celebrating success

When asked about what made them feel included and welcome at school, students mentioned circumstances where they excelled and contributed to the school. These included the success of Pride Week and the QR scanning code game, performing in Polyfest and succeeding to regional competition, taking on leadership roles, and taking part in clubs and sports teams. It is interesting that in the context of an academic institution, none of the examples of excellence provided by the students were of an academic nature. Perhaps this is because academic success tends to be an individual effort, setting the student apart from her peers. Certainly in the description of the success of Pride Week in the following quote, the student focuses her feeling of accomplishment on the communal aspects of their achievement, as a group endeavour (which included arranging a panel of MPs to come talk about queer rights and being queer in politics, decorating the school with rainbows, showing a short film,

and organising a bake sale and bracelet making) that was undertaken for the benefit of the school as a whole.

We took the initiative and that's also a way of educating other people about things. ... Everyone was giving really positive feedback and the teachers loved it and lots of students loved it and told us how keen they were. ... One young girl said that she was excited to be coming to school, because this is cool and everything was so out there and accepting, and she just said "I feel really good about this". We're like, that's amazing that we've managed to create that environment, that someone who previously doesn't like coming to school is actually looking forward to it. That's a really big deal. ... And we had amazing stories of teachers saying oh, these two girls came out in our class today and it was totally fine, everyone was super supportive and it was amazing. I'm like oh my God, we contributed to that, that's crazy! [student]

Pride Week was seen as an example of valuable and manageable student-led social action that teachers were unanimous in describing as an outstanding initiative. One student, who did a lot of event organising, wished there was better access to resources and easier access to funding for additional resources to make it easier for students to organise school events.

Celebrating diversity

When asked about what made them feel included and welcome at school, students also consistently mentioned the events (such as the Cultural Variety night) that celebrated the cultures of students' ethnic groups, the powhiri held for the incoming Year 9 students, and the school's explicit lack of tolerance for racial discrimination. According to students and teachers, the cultural events created a sense of belonging for students of different ethnic groups, made the students feel good, and opened conversations about culture and cultural difference. (One student suggested that school events should be better promoted, especially so Year 9s don't miss out.)

The Polyfest performance thing, that definitely made me feel more connected to the school ... we performed at the regional performances. Yeah, it definitely made me feel a sense of pride for our school and I felt included. It was a really good vibe and because it was all about sharing each other's cultures and embracing them. ... It gave a really good reflection of what it's like to be a Polynesian at [School]. [student]

Matariki started a lot of conversation. ... Samoan Language Week they gave out lollies actually that week ... We have the new Chinese classroom and we've got two new dragons, the Chinese dragons, which is really exciting. [student]

The importance of friendships in making difference and diversity safe

Students underlined the importance of having friends that they could look forward to seeing at school and who were essential to feeling valued and safe. They recalled how they met their friends over their years at [School], in classes, clubs and sport teams, riding the bus, and sometimes from kindy and family contacts. They gradually brought together a support network that, by Year 13, was a fundamental resource to them – friends to talk to and vent with, and feel close to.

Often, it's good to help relieve stress, to have rants with each other about what's going on at school ... it's how you also stay quite close, you learn a lot about each other. [student]

What makes you feel like part of the school, is having people you can talk to ... wanting to go to school and being at school, just having that friend group. [student]

The student group interview discussed the importance of friendship and proposed that the way to make real friends was to be yourself in the first place, and then find the right people that you could be yourself with.

- It's kind of important to feel safe here, because you are here for such a long period of time, ... and having students like this being friends with you and being your support system, it really does make a difference with your experience here. ... So I think with me it was trying to be myself, find the right people and ... that we had a lot in common, same sense of humour and stuff and I guess, through that, that allowed us to make a connection and over time we could open up more, so to speak. So I feel like, yeah, just being yourself. Even though that is a cliché and that can be hard, you kind of have to do that if you want to make it at school and find your place.
- You've kind of got to accept that not everyone's ... going to like you no matter what, and you just come to a point where you stop. If people don't like you, they don't like you. Just move on.
- You're like, screw it, I'm just going to be me, I'd rather be me and not have friends.
- I clearly have found my clan. [student focus group]

Students explained how hard it was in Year 9, finding and making one's first friends at the school, and referred to it as "the Year 9 drama". They said that eventually this phase passed (later for some than for others), students settled into friendship networks and thus became more comfortable over time.

When I was in Year 9 we had like a friend group from the start. I wasn't friends with people I was friends with now, and it was going fine, but then over time people got really – I don't know, they just got mean, like trying to fit in with other people until they push away people who don't fit into that group and that's how I actually met people who I'm friends with now. So it was a bad experience at the time, but it's like it kind of needed to happen in a way because it led me to who I'm friends with now and I've become a better person from it. [student]

When I was Year 9, I felt really out of place. I guess it was just really hard for me because I didn't really know how to talk to people, to make friends. ... I guess I was just that type of kid who is just really quiet. I was also really shy. I got embarrassed quite easily, but as I grew up I became a bit more open and I started feeling myself more part of here. [student]

The importance of interpersonal relationships on students' sense of belonging cannot be overstated. Just as good friends made a student feel safe, bad friends made them feel unsafe.

Year 9, I hated [School], I wanted to leave, just because of bad experiences and stuff, but I kind of stayed and met new people and now – Year 13 ... I feel pretty good now because [there's] people I can turn to. [student]

Teachers (discussing diversity in a group forum) also asserted the importance of personal connections. They were troubled by the fact that some students did not seem to be in friendship groups, and were concerned at their isolation.

I see a cohort of students who are ... totally isolated and lonely. [several other teachers making sounds of agreement] Today I saw someone who I see every day for two terms – twice a day, break and lunch – and today was the first time I saw someone, another student, talk to her. And there's this new research that shows that loneliness is as damaging as smoking or some of those physical ills. ... I'd have this conversation about our new spaces and how we can make them safe and inclusive to everyone. I want to be reaching out to some of those students who really aren't bonded at all. [teacher]

Sports and other activities

Students identified sports and other activities as opportunities to meet other students – across differences, such as year group – and make friends, and also another arena to succeed and foster pride in their school.

They have lots of clubs and events running, and sports teams, and I don't remember when I first came to [School] joining any of them until ... I realised I wanted to be more involved in the school and what it was about. So I joined sports teams. And you do meet a lot of people from different year groups, depending on the team you get put in, and you just felt more involved with the school because you're representing the school, obviously, at team events and stuff ... Netball is more competitive but badminton is really social, how it's run at the school, so you meet a lot of people from other schools as well. ... In Year 12 they wanted us to be involved for leadership roles and stuff. It was kind of a requirement, so I kind of had to do it you know, so I've got stuff to put on my thing [cv] but the more I did it, the more I realised I liked it and I kind of wished I'd done it from day one. [student]

The QSA [Queer—Straight Alliance] is really good. ... Essentially we meet once a week and my friends are leaders of it and they just organise things like discussions or sometimes we'll have shared lunches or watch videos or something. It's just a really nice environment and it's cool because there's lots of Juniors there and we really like that because when we were their age we wouldn't have even considered coming to this kind of group. ... It's about educating and it's about discussions. [student]

Integrating International, refugee and migrant students

The description of the situation of International Students, and refugee and new migrant students, in this section comes from interviews with two staff members who were involved in working with these students. None of the students in these categories volunteered to be interviewed.

The school seemed keen to make appropriate adaptations to help students from overseas to acclimate comfortably. For example, the school responded quickly to adjust the uniform to incorporate longer skirts and headscarves for Muslim students. One teacher pointed out that the culture of birth of some of the students was so different from New Zealand that they were often having to be in two worlds, constantly negotiating the gap. Their parents' expectations and ambitions were sometimes affected by the costs of keeping their kids in school, so that the International Students' parents wanted to speed up their education, while the refugee and new migrant parents were more likely to want to stretch out the time in school to maximise their children's academic success and entry into tertiary education. Some refugee and migrant students were limited by their home commitments from being able to fully partake in extracurricular activities.

Number of fee-paying international students and origins and stay

There were around 25 fee-paying International Students at the time of the research, and this was described as a good number that allowed the students to be integrated into the school as a whole, and not segregated as they were in some schools with a much larger international enrolment. They stayed for varying periods, from a few weeks to a full academic year. The short-term students were harder to assess and integrate. It was better if they stayed for at least a term, but sometimes the short-term students came back for a longer period the following year. The biggest group came from a school in Osaka, Japan, and stayed for the academic year. Others came from China and Thailand. New Zealand tended not to get the highest-achieving students, and sometimes their parents had unrealistic ambitions for them.

There was a strong support network for International Students. They were placed with a home-stay family, had an International Dean, a home-stay coordinator, another support person and the team worked closely with the families, with the agents and with the students themselves. They mixed with the other students. The teachers felt that the international students appreciated the smaller class size, greater choice of classes, and sports programmes available to them at [School] compared to their home schools.

Refugee and migrant students

A lot of refugees had not been in school previously, so the school needed to identify where their gaps were. Sometime special resources were required, for example, for a profoundly deaf student just come from Myanmar with no English. The refugee and migrant students were praised for their resilience and determination, and the fact that they tried to make the most of the experience and opportunities of their schooling, which they valued.

English Language Learning department

The English Language Learning department had three teachers, including one full time. There was an English Language Learning course, a Reception course for those with no English when they arrive, and an Academic Literacy course for students who were in mainstream classes but needed additional language help to access the curriculum. The senior school programmes had three classes at 100, 200 and 300 levels that students were tested into. The teacher emphasised the value for students already in mainstream classes to stay with the course, mainly for help with technical and academic English, until they were ready for mainstream English. Another point emphasised was the importance of separating English Language Learning from Special Needs.

Reception class

The full-time Reception class was for students coming in with no English, and this was thought to be unique for this city. There were currently 25 in the class including five International Students. The class was taught in English, had a Google site and 10 computers, and had its own teacher aide who took the class when the other teachers were taking the senior classes.

The students grew confidence from learning in the Reception Class. They mixed with each other, and friends from the rest of the school would come to the Reception Class area at lunch time, which enhanced integration into the school.

Mainstream classes

The Reception Class members were gradually integrated into mainstream classes as soon as they were ready for them, and there was some teacher aide support for them in mainstream classes. They were also integrated into Ako classes with mainstream students. English language problems only became an issue when the students enrolled in mainstream classes before they were ready for them.

The Home—School Partnership for refugee and migrant students

Teachers described how the school tried to engage the parents of refugee and migrant students, which was difficult due to parents' work commitments. They have had good turn-outs with inviting parents to the success evening, where they celebrate their own community prize-giving, and to a dinner and performance evening where the school (with additional funding from the Parents Association) buys the ingredients for the students' home recipes and the students, including international students, cook for all the parents and then entertain them with traditional dance and dress. "That's been a real hit in the last, say, four years."

It was felt that there was a gap in the area of student-led initiatives among refugees and new migrants. It was hoped that outreach from the community, perhaps along the lines of Pasifika Outreach and Māori Outreach with youth workers and mentors from community organisations, might help this along.

3.3 Diversity and the learning environment

Students and teachers described how [School]'s learning environment supported engagement with diversity. In particular, they saw the value of teachers relating to their students as individuals, and providing a balanced and inclusive curriculum.

Teachers supporting students as individuals

Teachers and students alike highlighted the importance of individual teacher—student relationships in making students feel part of the school.

In the context of discussing what made them feel included, students volunteered that they had good relationships with staff members, and were encouraged by them to excel academically and not settle for anything less than their best. When asked whether the teachers ever made them feel excluded, the answer was overwhelmingly “no”. Students also mentioned teacher support for sports and other activities, including QSA and Homework Club.

My teachers believe in me a lot and that’s why I get along with most of them really well. [student]

My connection with the school is definitely related towards the teachers. They are quite welcoming as well and they definitely push you, like do as best as you can. They never want you to just settle for mediocre standards, they always want you to reach your potential. [student]

On my first day ... my Ako teacher was new, too, and we ended up striking up a conversation, and it was really nice just to start with someone else and that was really welcoming. And all of the staff were really welcoming. ... There is generally quite a good camaraderie among staff and students from what I see. Everyone tends to be really helpful and supportive. [student]

Teachers and other staff, and management, too, were seen by students to play an important role in supporting student activities.

One of the counsellors is in charge of the QSA and she’s a really good teacher voice for that, because it’s hard, as students, sometimes, to talk to teachers about what we’re doing or why we’re doing certain events or things and she’s really good to have within the staff level. We had to go talk to staff about the Pride Week, she introduced us while we were there and we talked to them ... about what we were doing for our Pride Week and what we needed from them. ... I was humbled by the support that the staff gave and the SLT gave because they were so openly oh, you guys are doing great work. This is really cool and Miss Houghton who is our Principal wrote a really lovely thing about it in the newsletter and talked about how proud she was of what we’d done and how it was really cool that these young people are getting involved ... It was amazing to get that recognition of what we’ve done. [student]

Teachers themselves emphasised the importance of relating to students as individuals. Teachers discussed the importance of the relationships they built with students, and of being “aware of a student as a whole”.

I suppose for me I’m interested in people and for me I see the students as individual people and it’s about making a relationship with that person and it doesn’t matter what their background is, it’s about me making the effort to form a relationship with them and through that process of forming a relationship with them I learn more about them and about who they are and I think if that’s right, if you’ve got that relationship, then you can do anything. [teacher]

Teachers, relating to students in their pastoral role, had a profound influence, helping students when friendship networks broke down.

It was just a moment of time when I didn’t want to be at [School] anymore, I wanted to leave. ... There was this one teacher who did help. ... It was mainly just sit down and talk, and they’d just go through everything and be like you just need to stay away from them. It’s kind of like

you had to be told to stay away, you know. And like help you meet new people and stuff.
[student]

Not every teacher succeeded every time in seeing every student as an individual and, in the section below on “Examples of insensitivity to diversity”, a New Zealand-born Chinese student describes how a teacher discussed her work with her assuming that she must be an overseas student.

Hierarchy and separation

Teachers commented, both positively and negatively, on several aspects of inclusion and exclusion, specifically addressing the ways in which students were sometimes physically separated along the lines of age and ethnicity, and distinguished by their accomplishments. One teacher criticised the practices of separating the year groups, and of creating a hierarchy of students by their achievements. The teacher suggested that by too-explicitly identifying the needs of a particular ethnic group, it was possible to set this group apart, as well.

The fact that we have classrooms, as well, and we organise by age – it’s kind of like saying everyone has his place. But I would say no, this is very industrial and why 14-year-olds cannot hang out with the 18-year-olds? And perhaps have the same understanding and the same talent in one subject? But we do not, because we have to organise everything in boxes. So the organisation tries to be inclusive, but within inclusiveness there is a lot of separation. ... [Also] because we highlight the Pasifika needs in terms of curriculum and achievements and pastoral and understanding, we actually highlight the difference. [teacher]

A different point was made about ethnicity. One teacher found that because there were so many Pasifika students at the school, some teachers tried to discourage them from socialising with each other in large all-Pasifika groups. The teacher felt this was unkind because the Pasifika students had so much in common and enjoyed each other’s company. The teacher also felt it was wrong because this limitation was not applied to smaller ethnic groupings, thus unfairly singling out the Pasifika to interfere with their socialising – whereas girls who had no one of the same ethnicity to hang out with would perforce socialise in a mixed group.

Pasifika students like to hang out with Pasifika students because they share some common things and so teachers try to spread the groups. So when we are in Ako class for example, you often had cliquy groups, which is normal, everyone has always their group to hang out with, but once it’s a Pasifika group, the teachers are like “oh you girls, you are always together, let’s split you”. ... But we do not split the other groups. ... I don’t think it is a problem [for the Pasifika to hang out together]. [teacher]

The importance of a balanced and inclusive curriculum

Teachers argued for an inclusive curriculum that provided students with a broad range of learning opportunities, in which minority groups were visible and different ideas were entertained.

Aside from your personal interactions with students and being as open as you can, I think you have some kind of responsibility, probably in some subjects more than others, but across the board, to make sure your curriculum is balanced, so that you have a range of topics that introduce a range of opinions and races and classes and orientations, so that no major minority is left invisible, which is harder in some subjects than others. [teacher]

Studying the Homosexual Law Reform Bill was an example one teacher gave of broadening the curriculum in a valuable way, and this was supported by a student interviewee.

I remember a few years ago somebody saying that homosexuality or whatever was never really in the curriculum, never came up and I thought about my programme and I thought that’s probably true, just in my programme I’ve never done a text or a film or anything that’s

really addressed that. In Sociology in Term One we did the Homosexual Law Reform Bill – and deliberately, so that I could say it's in the curriculum. [laughter] But that led to discussion about that, and then by coincidence they did their first Pride week in Term Three, and the MPs were talking about the marriage reform and being teenagers when the Homosexual Law Reform Bill happened. [teacher]

I was really lucky, my Sociology class at the beginning of this year did stuff on Homosexual Law Reform with my teacher and so that was a cool way of integrating stuff that I'm really interested in, in the work that we're doing. [student]

Other areas of teaching, including Year 9 debating and the International Students programme, also brought out opportunities for a more inclusive curriculum.

Today we did Year 9 debates and one of the debate topics was "Should the next Disney princess be a lesbian?" And it was the most interesting debate. The girls that were negating that were so worried about how to address that, and not come across as like – ["That's great!" interjected another teacher present] but they actually came up with some really, really great points. But it was really good and created discussion in the class. [teacher in group discussion]

With our IS programme our whole theme is "From adversity to empowerment", the whole theme. So every text, every single thing we do throughout the whole year fits into that, and the kids fit into that, too. So it's like there are so many ways in which they can relate that resonates, it's really rich, everything that dovetails through – and so we looked at who was in the room, we selected texts that are culturally appropriate or rich for them ... it's opened up that wanting to share. [teacher in group discussion]

3.4 Enabling student engagement with diversity

It was evident from the interviews with the teachers how seriously they took the diversity of [School]'s social makeup. Diversity was acknowledged as a positive aspect of [School]'s reputation. More importantly, diversity was seen as a developmental opportunity for students, and teachers actively incorporated learning about diversity into the curriculum. There were many ways mentioned by teachers to help students explore diversity at [School]. These included a group of Sociology research projects (*Is [School] a Fair and Harmonious Society*) that were aimed at giving rise to social action; encouraging students to share their stories with each other in the classroom as a form of empowerment; and several field exercises (the Privilege Walk, the Spider Web exercise and creating a diversity video). These activities are described below.

"*Is [School] a Fair and Harmonious Society*" student research and social action

Members of the senior Sociology class were set the assignment of researching whether the school was a fair and harmonious society. They each selected a particular group of students distinguished by ethnic identity, school-related grouping or other social characteristic, and interviewed them about how they felt about being at [School]. The Sociology students then identified some social action that would address a problem that the research revealed.

In social studies there are two assessments that go together. One is a social enquiry and one is a social action. The social enquiry became this: "*Is [School] a Fair and Harmonious Society for — ?*" Students picked a group within [School] students. So these are examples of research enquiries that some students did: is it fair and harmonious for Muslim, Christian, Year 9, LGBT, SNOODS [special needs & disabilities], New Migrant and IS [International Students] students. The second assessment is to do an action to address any issues that came up in the enquiry. So if they've found that a particular problem had made it so it wasn't fair and harmonious then they could carry out an action to try and address that. [teacher]

The student researchers described the findings from their various projects as, on the whole, positive. Overall, for each of the groups that were the subject of the Sociology research projects, [School] was found to be a generally fair and harmonious society. However, some shortcomings in fairness and harmony were identified by the senior Sociology researchers, along with proposed corrective social actions, and these points are summarised below.

Fair and harmonious for Māori?

Students who chose the Senior Sociology assignment topic of “Is [School] a fair and harmonious society for Māori” found overall that the school was fair and harmonious. They nevertheless identified areas for improvement, specifically, integrating the teaching of Māori culture across the curriculum.

I can conclude from my research data collected and my own opinion that [School] is generally considered to be a fair and harmonious place for Māori students. However, concerns were raised and there is clearly room for improvement. A lot of the girls I talked to prefer to hang out with their own because that’s what they know, who they are comfortable with and what’s normal to them. The lack of understanding and acceptance between cultural groups has led to both Māori and non-Māori being uncomfortable. The school magazine website, etc etc works hard to make Māori seen in the school, visibility however is one thing whereas actually providing for the needs of these students is another thing. [student’s research report]

In order to address this concern, the students made the following proposal to further the integration of Māori culture into the curriculum:

We’re just doing social actions in Year 13 Sociology at the moment, and we’re proposing a change to the wider school curriculum to integrate Māori culture more broadly in order to address the limited knowledge held by students at [School] about New Zealand history and the role of Māori as tangata whenua. ... We thought that this proposal is closely linked to the Goal 4 of Te Whānau Tūtahi strategic goals, which says to support the meaning of kaupapa Māori and in particular mana whenua across the WEGC curriculum. ... pretty much everything could incorporate it in one way or another and we just want to show the importance of doing that, so it could have more like a widespread effect. ... We hope that through trying to integrate Māori culture the students will be able to celebrate their identity to a greater extent and this will also help [School] demonstrate the school values more effectively. [student presentation on social action proposal]

This raised concerns from teachers about tokenism and the limitations of teachers’ own knowledge of Māori culture, but they were generally enthusiastic about the recommendation to further the integration of Māori culture across the curriculum.

Just after I started here there was an absolute upsurge in Māori writers, like Witi Ihimaera, starting with his short stories. And we taught a great deal, at the time, of Māori writers and we still do. But when Kahikatea came in, which is really what you girls are talking about, in the whole sense of feeling yourself being educated as Māori, it felt like tokenism, a bit, just to do a Māori text, because that isn’t what it was anymore. I just wonder if we’ve moved too far away. We’re not maybe making enough of Māori writers either. [teacher]

I think at the same time though some of us are trying and doing it. That tokenism, we do have to be careful about that, but it depends on your class. But I’ve taught for a few years now and ... this year has been particularly special, because I’ve got a student in the class who is from that area and it’s so authentic, because she has done an interview with her koro [grandfather] and shared that with us, has shared pictures, talks to us about the real life part of it and I could never have a plan for that. [teacher]

Fair and harmonious for new migrants?

The students' research report on New Migrants brought out one issue: that a lack of celebration of African cultures made the new migrant students from Africa (among the new migrant students interviewed for the assignment) feel excluded.

Do you think [School] celebrates your culture? I received mixed views of this question and it was probably down to the fact that my focus group was made up of varying cultures. Some felt very included, others not at all. The Ethiopian and Somali refugees felt excluded from cultural celebrations stating that it made them feel left out, they didn't do anything for Africa. I was given an example from Teacher A of two African Muslims who took off their headscarves after a year because they wanted to fit in and integrate more. Teacher A was fully aware it was their choice but believed that because of the lack of celebration and visibility they felt as though they needed to integrate because they felt othered. [student report]

Fair and harmonious for LGBTI?

The LGBTI report found that some staff were not ok with using different pronouns and names when students wanted that, and the students interviewed for the report disagreed on how supportive other students were.

The students felt there was a wide variety on how queer students were treated by different staff. This was particularly in respect to gender identity as this is far more visible than sexuality, which is usually not known by teachers. Student 2 said they had heard mixed things about the school and how it handles pronouns and Student 4 agreed saying there are some staff who are okay with different pronouns and names and some who just won't. Student 3 felt that students were mostly supportive while the other speakers were less positive. Student 2 felt that students don't actually care when they spoke at assembly and Student 4 felt students were less supportive than staff. Student 1 said they'd experienced more outright negative responses from students than from staff. [student report]

Pride Week was identified by several teachers (both in their interviews and in their group discussion after listening to the Senior Sociology presentation) as a successful implementation of student social action.

I feel like Pride week was a really great initiative and I think that what is interesting for me about doing this is the potential for them to spot small things and think about potential actions that could come out of it. Often when I've done social action in the past people have thought too big, oh, it's changed the world. It's like no, what could you do about that problem that is a valuable social action that you can carry out? So that has been interesting. [teacher]

Empowering students to tell their stories

A group of teachers were given a presentation by senior Sociology students about the findings from their "Is [School] a fair and harmonious society" research projects. In the context of reflecting on this presentation, the teachers talked about the value of encouraging and empowering students to talk about their lives in order to facilitate bridging between student groups. They recommended using an inclusive curriculum to open discussion, and shared experiences for the students to promote their bonding.

Last year in my Year 10 English class, with a couple of Ethiopian students who had been in that ... Ako class ... for nearly two years, and yet the class didn't know anything about them. ... We were doing speeches and I'm always encouraging, wanting them to share their story. It's the most potent, powerful thing they can do, and that's what we were doing. I asked them to speak and it was really, really great and I felt they've done lots of social bridging this year. ... Anyway, by the end of Year 10 those girls were finally starting to share their stories.

I think a lot of our subjects tend to give us the chance to talk about it in a more abstract way, that then leads in. So for English for instance, at the moment I'm doing "Bend It Like Beckham" as a film and that's got some of the Indian girls in the Year 10 class so excited. ... A Sikh girl ... putting up her hand to explain about a scene. ... And then amongst that we're talking about how the mother has got these high expectations and my duty there is to help them see that the mother is allowed to have that perspective ... and what shaped her, and get them thinking about that from different perspectives. [One student] for instance starts talking about her family and her Mum's like that and that's from a Samoan family and they're making those connections that way. So it's a text. We're talking about the characters and Social Studies offers that and Drama offers that. There's different perspectives and to talk about it that way to them, make those connections and share through it. [teacher]

I did a ... short story ... in my 101 alternative class ... and two of the girls who were wearing the headscarves gave a speech and both of them during the speech took their headscarves off and it was very moving and very powerful. ... It comes down to a text that kind of puts it in a ... more comfortable context. They did talk about their lives but they were doing it from the point of view of a text and not just somebody questioning them. [teacher]

Field exercises

The Privilege Walk

The Privilege Walk was a technique used by one teacher to help students explore their different access to privilege. Students stood side by side in a row, and a series of questions were asked of them all that reflected on their access to privilege. They then took a step forward or back depending on their answer to each question. For example, to answer "Yes" to the question "Are you right-handed?" meant a step forward; more than 50 books in your house? – a step forward. (Students were told that this was voluntary and they didn't need to step at all if they didn't want to.) The results showed great diversity between the students. It turned out that acknowledging their greater access to privilege made some of those students feel ashamed and guilty. However, not all of the more-privileged felt that way, because there was also great diversity in their responses to the experience. Overall, it made the students uncomfortable. The teacher said that she would have to reflect further on what had happened before she would consider doing the exercise with another group, although she felt the discussion was thought-provoking.

I said give me one word, what was your feeling when we finished the Privilege Walk. And I had "guilt", I had "ashamed". We understand that the more you go backwards the less privilege you have and I think they're old enough to understand that, but the girls who feel ashamed are the girls who actually have stepped the most forward. [teacher]

Spider web exercise

The spider web exercise was planned (not yet executed) as an exploration of students' diversity across a wide range of characteristics. Students were to plant many stakes in the ground, each labelled with a personal characteristic. Each would have a ball of yarn to wind around and link all the stakes that described them personally, showing all the things they had in common or not.

I play sport, I like chocolate, I have a brother, I'm a single child, I like boys, I like girls, and we will have a big ball of wool and they have to go around all the sticks that they are, and so after you would have this huge spider web, which shows who is Year 11 as a whole. So every one student is one thread but because seven classes by twenty-five [students] we have over a 150 kids doing the same activity, passing the thread all around the stake. At the end of the activity it would be a very complex, huge kind of spider web interconnected. ... There are some spots on the web that would be bigger [than others]. ... We just saw a video of it and we thought it would be great. [teacher]

Creating a diversity video

Students were given the opportunity to explore diversity in a self-directed way, creating a video entirely of their own devising. The groups came up with very different results, some only fathomable to the students themselves, but each a cooperative effort to look at diversity.

Then we've done a video about diversity and it was really cute ... I didn't really understand the video but it made a lot of sense for them, but the beauty for me was they were all working together ... That was the first introduction of diversity and I just let them do what they wanted. [teacher]

3.5 Areas related to diversity that could be improved, identified by staff and students

Students and staff were overall positive in their assessment of the culture at [School] in terms of how well it engaged with diversity on campus. However, they were still able to identify a few areas that could be improved. The subject of "cliquiness" and its salience across the board in school culture came up repeatedly during student interviews. Students also mentioned the need to promote polite discourse when arguing ideas in class.

Cliquiness and table culture

An issue that emerged spontaneously from the student interviews was the perceived "cliquiness" of the school, both inside and outside of the classroom. They agreed that people stuck to their own groups, and it was not the done thing to try to connect with others outside one's group in a social way. For example, one would never bring one's lunch over and sit with a group that was not one's own. One student identified this as the one thing she would change about the school – that somehow students' mind-sets should be changed so that the school was less cliquy.

Everyone's in cliques and you don't really engage with other people outside of your clique unless a school activity or something like that. [student]

It's just one of those things, they'd have their own friends and you'd want to sit with your friends, I guess. [student]

I think I would make it where everyone had – because I think everyone's attitudes are the way that they are (like with the cliques, and only hanging out with the cliques) is only there because that's what it's always been like – so that's just everyone's mind-set. So I think that if everyone's mind-sets changed, where everyone can hang out with anyone and everyone can accept differences ... and just be more inclusive of each other. I would gladly let anyone hang out with us but I couldn't say the same for other groups. [student]

The issue of cliquiness connected to the table culture of the classroom, where students typically sat in more-or-less permanent table groups that were visibly homogeneous, either by ethnicity or personal style. Both teachers and students mentioned this.

I've got ... the most segregated class I've ever taught. It's in three groups. There is a Middle Eastern African group, there is a white girl group and there is a brown girl group, like Māori Pasifika. Man that's tough. They have had the shared experience of being in my class and they coexist fine and today we were doing black feminism and it was a very interesting discussion but what I've felt through the year as we've gone through is that, not "oh, it would be interesting to learn about something from another perspective", but "I'll pay attention during this section and I will pay less attention during this section" and that is going always. Middle Eastern girls and the African girls switch off when the white person's talking and then when the black people are talking it's like – so mixing them up and all kinds of things. Very bonded. [teacher]

It does tend to be just Māori and of Pacific Island descent in my [table] group and there's one girl who is half European as well. She just hangs out with us. [student of both Māori and Pasifika descent]

The only time I would ever interact with other students outside of my friend group would be if I'm in a class with them, because all my classes, I have like barely any of my friends in my classes, and it's mainly just girls outside them. But I only interact with the ones I sit with at the table – and we don't really interact with people outside of the [table] group unless there's a whole class activity where everyone has to mix up and stuff, but that rarely happens. [student]

A lot of people get quite annoyed at that [mixing table groups] actually, because you can get people who don't want to do the work. [student]

The Māori/Samoan student sometimes felt like she was considered lesser by some students and felt unwelcome when her friends were not in her class and she needed to join other students for a group activity. From time to time, table groups would be shaken up, with varying results.

Like where we had to split up and I don't always have my friends in my class so I'd always be with people that I don't normally talk to and it just feels awkward, not welcoming, not like, "We've got a task to do, so what do you think?" ... You don't feel free to open your mouth about something because you don't feel that comfortable. [student]

Another student described the awkwardness she felt in trying to fit in with students that weren't part of her table group. The student didn't connect the awkwardness with her ethnic difference (she was of Asian descent), but to personal style.

I think this was during English class and you had to sort of get into groups and discuss things and stuff and when they talked – it was just really different from how I usually talk. They sort of talk like, sort of like "chill" and say stuff like. I sort of tried talking like that too ... just so we could be more comfortable. I ended up looking really lame. It was just because ... I tried to be cool but I just sounded really weird. [student]

Some students mentioned having their ideas denigrated by other students in class rather than politely disagreed with or civilly argued against. They said that they would like to have disrespectful behaviour monitored and managed.

Obviously, you're going to have debates in class, but if a teacher's asked something and somebody puts up their hand and voices their opinion, there's always a group of people that – obviously there's going to be people that disagree, but people, they put that opinion down, they're like "no, there's no way that could happen, that's just stupid, why would you think that", that kind of attitude, rather than "that's a good point, but the way I see it would be –". Just simple things like that. That one often happens because you're often getting asked questions and what your opinion is. ... I think it's such a norm at this school that a blind eye is turned to it. It is like the teacher just sits, they're just like – obviously they're interested to hear everyone's opinions, but they don't realise that it can be quite – for some people, if they're really strong about their opinion, it could be disheartening for them. ... In my opinion, the teachers do their job well – and they never really judge you or anything, which is why I don't understand why there is so much judgement in the classroom in the first place. [student]

Some teachers did not see the school as cliquy. However, teachers might tend to be mainly exposed to classroom-located behaviour, and miss the evidence for cliquiness outside of the classroom. On the other hand, they may be more likely to view the level of cliquiness that exists – painful though it may be to students – as normal, age-typical and relative.

Progress on incorporating pants in the school uniform

The school's lack of progress in incorporating pants into the uniform seemed – to some teachers and students – to run counter to the value of accepting everybody and their differences and valuing the differences. [NB: [School] has since adopted gender-neutral uniform policies.]

We're trying to organise at the moment to get pants as a part of our uniform and with the senior management and just kind of they're having to come at it from an administrative point of view, whereas we're coming at it from supporting students who don't want to be wearing skirts point of view. [student]

The physical environment and diversity

One teacher felt that the environment did not reflect the diversity of the school and improvements had been put on hold during the campus building and development, but believed that even temporary enrichment of the environment would be worthwhile.

I think our physical environment does not reflect a diverse community. It's a very boring environment. There are no cultural elements around the school I think. We used to have a nice Māori mural, but we put a prefab in front of that. ... To be fair to the school, I think because the building thing happened everything's kind of been – let's just wait and see. But that was four years ago, five years ago we moved out of the main block, and the building won't be built for another two, maybe three years. I think we could say that even if it is temporary, let's put up stuff that reflects us back out to ourselves. [teacher]

Areas for improvement relating to Teachers

Students saw teachers as important to their wellbeing. While their relationships with teachers were very positive overall, they were variable, and were developed on an individual basis.

The school really does value the students and they do want to make you feel safe here so I guess [it's] knowing which teachers you can go to. [student focus group]

It was argued by one student that there should be more opportunities for teachers to get to know students better, so that they would be easier to approach for recommendations. She commented that it was hard to ask teachers for recommendations for scholarships and school positions if you hadn't developed relationships with them on an individual level.

When we were applying for leadership roles, like prefects and tuakana, when you didn't get it, you looked at the people who did get it, and you realised how close they were to the teachers who chose it. ... If you weren't specifically close to a teacher or didn't have much interaction with them in class, you were kind of limited who you could put down and how much they would be able to actually talk about you. So it would be good just to have more opportunities just to let the teacher get to know you better because you have your Ako teacher who's supposed to know you, but at the time she was off on pregnancy leave and ... so I didn't have any teacher to put down. [student]

Some students wanted the teachers to better address bullying in the classroom between students, because people sometimes said mean things when the teacher's back was turned, or when the classroom was noisy, and cruel comments might pass unnoticed. And, as mentioned above, students wanted teachers to monitor the civility of discourse during classroom discussions and exchanges of opinion.

Insensitivity to diversity and bullying

Students provide examples of insensitivity to diversity, including ethnic, class, gender and sexual orientation. The problems for queer students regarding use of pronouns and gendered school

uniforms have already been covered. Here we will mention class (a student on a welfare benefit) and ethnic diversity, and general bullying.

The student of Māori and Samoan background, who was flatting on an independent social welfare benefit, said that she found other students in her classes to be insensitive to the fact that some girls came from settings that did not support their academic aspirations or successes, and this presented them with a genuine challenge, above and beyond what a middle-class student might experience. (She also objected to being told that she was “doing really well for somebody that’s on the youth benefit”.)

I remember one time in class somebody brought up about stereotypes with people that don’t succeed well and the girls were like: “Oh, I think they should just not make excuses for themselves and just get on with it” ... I was quite offended by that. ... The way she put it was like, just wake up and change your mind-set. ... I did [succeed academically] but it took a long time. ... When you don’t have surroundings that are motivating you to do that then it is a lot harder than if you had people there to encourage you.

A Samoan student said that “some people like to make assumptions based on skin colour” but she felt that this changed as people got to know her.

A student born in New Zealand of Chinese descent said that teachers repeatedly assumed she was from China, asked her how long she had been studying English, and complimented her on her excellent vocabulary and written work.

This one teacher ... we were doing an assessment, so I’m writing up this thing and I show it to her. She’s like ... “oh, this is really good”. I was like “thank you”. She was like “so how long have you been learning English?” and I was like, “I was born here”.

Three students mentioned verbal bullying. They said it was common, especially in Year 9, typically slipped under the teachers’ radar when the class was noisy. From the students’ comments, bullying seems to be psychological (bitchiness, being mean, casting slurs) rather than physical. The students wanted teachers to help.

Bullying occurs quite often, it happens quite a lot at our school, but the teachers they don’t really do much about it and so that’s one of the things that I would change. ... Classrooms get really rowdy and ... the teachers don’t take any notice of it and so I guess that’s sort of like fertile ground for the bullies to start picking on people, because everyone else is all busy doing whatever they’re doing. ... Just talking, saying mean things. Joking, but not really. Things like that. Ideally it would be nice to have no bullying. ... I guess the teachers could be more supportive. [student]

4. The school's environment

Several issues emerged from the study that related to broader environmental matters. These included aspects of the physical campus, and the use that was made of it, and the wider social and educational environment in which the school operates.

4.1 The campus and its social spaces

Overall the students felt that the spaces available to socialise were adequate, but fully claimed. The friendship groups in the school were seen to stick to a particular space and defend it against anyone else looking for a place to sit, so there was an element of exclusion in claiming spaces.

The Year 13 common room was an especially important resource to some of the students interviewed, whose friendship groups claimed parts of the common room. It was a desirable space because it was warm, weather-protected, had a kitchen, and no one could push a Year 13 student out of it. Other students used their Ako classrooms, because they could claim some ownership there, too. Otherwise, spaces could only be claimed conditionally, because teachers might need them for other purposes on the day.

My friend group tends to hang out on top field in the common room. ... You'll find that a lot of the year groups tend to stick around their Ako classes because their classrooms are just for them, so it's their space and so I guess that's what makes a good place, it's their space. [student]

We got kicked out of different classes just because the teachers only want to have their classes in there, so they kind of shuffle you along, so we just kind of ended up in the common room because as Year 13s we're allowed to be in there and so we just found a space within that bigger space and kind of made that our own. [student]

Sometimes it's quite hard because the Year 13 classes can be quite possessive of their rooms. They don't let other year groups in so it's really hard. [student]

Teachers and students commented on the fact that the campus was under construction to address earthquake risk. As mentioned above, one teacher argued that the environment did not reflect the school's diversity, and improving this was hampered by being in a temporary state due to the construction work. Some of the newer classrooms were very small, deliberately so to encourage small classes. However, one teacher pointed out that small classrooms also inhibited breaking up into groups for class activities. Another teacher thought that, for their physical and mental health, students should be encouraged to spend their free time out of doors, and especially outside of their classrooms.

4.2 Opinions about the Bring Your Own Device policy

Overall, students were pleased to make use of their devices, for school-related research and assignments and checking emails, and liked being able to work from home and to email teachers. One student praised the use of Google Classroom, and some mentioned the value of Facebook groups. There was some concern expressed about students getting distracted in class, especially Year 9s, and the problems this posed for teachers who tried to check up on what they were doing and keep their attention. One person mentioned that the Year 9s were not interacting with each other because they were so engrossed with their phones, and another student felt the Year 9s were vulnerable to the dangers of the internet, live chatting and livestreaming for hours, oblivious to the risk of their being recorded and then available on the Cloud.

4.3 The NZ educational environment

Students also raised concerns regarding aspects of the academic environment. These included: the high turnover of science teachers; non-performing students taking up a disproportionate amount of class time; high workloads; and from time to time being unable to get access to Computers on Wheels.

Science teacher turnover

One group of students reported negative experiences with their Science teachers, experiencing much staff turnover. The students were particularly concerned that some teachers, who were not native English speakers, were not sufficiently able to convey course content.

I dropped out. I did quite badly in that because I had to self-teach myself all of the context because my teacher just did not know how to teach us. There was a language barrier as well. She was German and she would say stuff in German. ... She'd get confused whether she was speaking German or English. [student]

It was like our Maths teacher we had, she was Russian and she would write on the board in Russian and she wouldn't realise, and she'd go oh sorry and she'd rub it out. It was just really confusing. [student]

Non-performing students taking up excessive class time

The students also expressed their concern about classes where the teacher devoted excessive time to "non-performing students" at the expense of those who did the work and wanted to do well in the exams. In the end, they complained to the teacher, with limited results, and helped each other to learn the material as best they could.

- The way that the tables are set. There's like two sides to the classroom ... So we're kind of all on one side and there's a whole bunch of people on the other side and there's quite a split between the two groups. ... We do the work. ... And then the other side of the group, they just don't do work and they sit there on their phones and the teacher gets really annoyed so he spends a lot of time just over there to try and get them to write the question on top of the piece of paper and obviously this takes half an hour and then we've done it in two minutes.
- We're just sitting there doing nothing, we're not learning anything. And then our internal is in two or three weeks ...
- One topic, we didn't learn anything, like the time series topic. We all ended up re-subbing, eh guys? ...
- We could have done so much better. ...
- They teach the class to the majority and they don't really focus on minority. Like if the majority of the class is not paying attention – [student focus group]

High workloads

The students in the focus group expressed concern about workloads and work—life balance. They said that they got overloaded with internal assessments from different classes coming due at the same time. They supported each other by encouraging each other to stay on track and get their work done. They also attended homework club at school, where they got face-to-face help from teachers and fellow students. Also, they were better able to motivate themselves to work while at school than at home.

Teachers agreed that work pressure on students was an issue. They discussed the context of pressure placed on schools and teacher, and the culture of competition that exists in the wider society, and its negative impact on student wellbeing.

I think we have created a really toxic environment and society, and it filters through the school in terms of pressures on everybody. [teacher]

The stress about work and the competition between kids and this race for achievements and credits ... at the end of the day the kids are so overloaded of work that they forget about their wellbeing and I have kids who do not sleep at night because they have so much assessment to do. [teacher]

5. Policies and practices aimed at wellbeing

Teachers in general felt that the school took wellbeing seriously, praising the Hauora Centre in particular, as well as the Tuakana—Teina programme, school support for cultural groups like Polygroup, Wellbeing Days and Ako classes. However, there was concern about the pressure on students to succeed, and that there were conflicting messages between these pressures and the focus on student wellbeing.

The Hauora Centre provided students with access to a range of services, including health classes, careers advice, a health nurse, social worker, and guidance counsellors. Teachers spoke positively about the guidance network, made up of the Deputy Principal, Deans, guidance leader and Hauora Centre professionals. One focus of pastoral care was identifying students at risk, and meeting regularly to monitor their progress. These meetings brought together those community agencies (which may include CAMHS, CYFS, EVOLVE, VIBE, etc) whose services have been activated for the students. One teacher mentioned the effectiveness of teachers collaborating with each other around student wellbeing, especially valuing the sharing of information.

The Tuakana—Teina programme involved weekly visits from selected Year 13 students to the Year 9 classes, and was mentioned positively by teachers and students.

Helps the Year 9s to feel they belong to a new school. I think it probably helps the Year 13s to feel they also belong to the school and their experience is valued. [teacher]

School support for cultural groups, like Polygroup, was described by teachers and students as valuable. Wellbeing Days, events that incorporated talks and workshops on relationships, sexual health, cyber safety and consent, were packaged differently for different year groups – 11, 12 and 13 – depending upon what issues might present for them. Students and teachers spoke positively about Wellbeing days.

Ako classes were described by one teacher as a “a conscious effort to take space in a week, three times a week, to do things that are not just about sport and study, but about living your life, how to balance things in your life.” Teachers saw much value in this innovation.

One of the student interviewees had the new role of Wellbeing Prefect. She described a wide range of activities that she instigated or was involved with, including organising Wellbeing Days with outside speakers. Another student wanted the school to expand health classes, with more in-depth teaching of sexuality, stress, anxiety and mental health.

I think health classes in general, like what is taught about mental health and what is taught about different sexualities and stuff – maybe expanding that and expanding the mental health as well, especially because they only offer health in Years 9 and 10, so maybe offering at another higher level as well, just for interest ... expanding and maybe going in more depth. Maybe it's changed a little bit, but when I did mental health in Years 9 and 10, it was very skim the surface, and they just mainly talked about stress. ... Let's talk about this a bit more ... more stuff about anxiety or about depression, helping others through difficult times or how to look after yourself at these times. [student]

Mixed messages

Together with the overwhelmingly positive assessments of [School]'s wellbeing programmes and policies, there was one key concern expressed. Some teachers and students felt that there was a lot of pressure on students to excel academically, and there were mixed messages being sent about the need to succeed, on the one hand, and the importance of looking after one's personal wellbeing, on the other.

Competitiveness. Look after your wellbeing, do yoga, take time out, treat yourself – but if you fail at school, you're screwed! Excellents on everything! Apply for scholarships! Oh my god, you didn't apply for the scholarship! Your life is over! [laughter] So I would call that a mixed message. Generally, we care, and the Hauora Centre is fantastic and Ako programme has great stuff to help young people growing up to get a grip on stuff. On the other hand there's all of that relentless kind of "you've got to get ahead", "Are you falling behind?" [teacher]

6. Conclusions

Overall, the students and teachers interviewed were very positive about the way [School] engaged with difference and diversity. Several participants said that the school cares and pays attention to student needs and wellbeing. A case in point is the issue of the school's dress code. The school was seen by participants in the research as very sensitive to the needs of Muslim students regarding dress and quickly accommodated these with long skirts and head-covering. Several students and teachers who were interviewed raised the need for a gender-neutral dress code, and before it could even be discussed in this report, a gender-neutral dress code was adopted by the school in 2016.

One suggestion that emerged from the analysis of this research was to expand the Tuakana—Teina programme, where Year 13s regularly visit Year 9 Ako classes to be supportive. This programme was mentioned positively by participants. The Year 13 students who were interviewed nearly all recalled the pains of being a Year 9 student, and although the research did not include interviews with Year 9s, it seems reasonable to accept the likelihood that it is a difficult time for students. Also, from a few of the student interviews, there seemed to be some competition for the limited number of special Year 13 roles of prefects and Tuakana. It may be that by expanding the Tuakana—Teina programme to include more Year 13s or even additional Year groups, it might be possible to address both these issues.

This report will conclude with a selection of the recommendations put forward by participants, in response to interview questions asking for their suggestions.

A few students referred to verbal bullying by other students, asking that teachers address it better in the classroom, with less tolerance for students putting down other students' opinions, and providing some education around bullying and better ways of communication. Teachers agreed with the observation that there seemed to be some students who were isolated and lonely. Given the importance of the friendship groups, it would be worthwhile to consider how these students could be reached out to and friendships facilitated.

The fair and harmonious research projects raised several recommendations, including: to better incorporate Māori culture into the curriculum; to include celebration of African cultures; and to display greater sensitivity to the use of pronouns appropriate to students' gender identities.

A teacher wanted the school environment to better reflect the diversity of its people, and not wait for the completion of campus construction to do it. A few teachers mentioned that the school values should be more of a living document and more actively incorporated into the life of the school.

Some students mentioned that non-performing students sometimes captured a disproportionate amount of class time when teachers focused on them, which may be a problem that could be addressed through professional development. Some students mentioned high workloads, too, and some teachers agreed with them that the pressure was too high, and said that there were mixed messages between pressure to excel and encouragement to pursue personal wellbeing. (The students particularly wanted the different departments to coordinate assignments so that they didn't all come due at the same time, a problem that will, sadly, continue to plague them at university.) One student wanted expansion of health classes to additional year groups, with classes tailored to their particular age-related needs.

It should be acknowledged that the nature of these recommendations reflect some very positive aspects of [School]'s culture: the students and teachers had very high expectations of the school and expected them to be met; they liked the people and wanted that reflected in the environment; the school values were meaningful to staff and students alike; staff cared about the students and students felt confident that they could look to their teachers as a resource for improving the classroom

environment; and the programmes and policies aimed at wellbeing were valued and appreciated (and so the students wanted even greater access to them).