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International Students in Ontario Secondary Schools: Demystifying the Stereotype
Élèves internationaux dans les écoles secondaires de l'Ontario : démystification du stéréotype

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article traite des résultats d'une étude pilote axée sur les expériences scolaires et l'adaptation sociale et culturelle d'étudiants internationaux venus au Canada pour apprendre l'anglais et obtenir un diplôme d'études secondaires de l'Ontario. N'étant pas de langue maternelle anglaise et n'ayant pas la citoyenneté canadienne, ils sont généralement amenés au Canada par leurs parents ou des agents de recrutement qui repartent après les avoir installés dans des familles d'accueil avec lesquelles ils n'ont eu pratiquement aucun contact préalable. Les répondants, éducateurs professionnels et étudiants focalisés pour la plupart, décrivent les sacrifices considérables que les parents de ces jeunes ont fait dans l'espoir que l'acquisition d'un anglais « légitime » permette à leur enfant d'ccéder à la citoyenneté mondiale et à un avenir sûr. Les répondants adultes ont souligné que beaucoup d'étudiants étrangers qui viennent faire leurs études secondaires au Canada éprouvent des difficultés de socialisation en langue seconde, et qu'une minorité importante d'entre eux sont considérés comme étant « à risque » d'échec scolaire. Les témoignages des éducateurs ont décrit des problèmes d'adaptation spécifiques, notamment : la solitude et la désorientation, le stress lié à la pression de la réussite scolaire et des conditions d'hébergement inadéquates. Les réponses des étudiants étaient plus nuancées en ce qui concerne les problèmes d'adaptation, révélant des décisions réfléchies à la suite d'une pondération stratégique de leurs options et de leurs choix. Les répondants ont désigné les divergences et inconsistances des politiques et protocoles des prestataires de services éducatifs et le manque de supervision adéquate comme facteurs explicatifs clés des problèmes auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants étrangers du secondaire.

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Abstract

This article addresses findings of a study focused on the schooling experiences and social and cultural adaptation of international students who have come to Canada to learn English and obtain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Nonnative speakers of English and noncitizens of Canada, they are brought to Canada by relatives or recruitment agents who depart after installing them with host families with whom they have had virtually no previous contact. Respondents, mostly professional educators and focal students, describe considerable sacrifices the youths' parents have made in the hope that acquisition of "legitimate" English will give their child access to global citizenship and a secure future. Adult respondents emphasized how many early study abroad students experience difficulties with second language socialization, with a significant minority considered "at risk" for academic failure. Testimony from educators described adaptation issues, including: loneliness and disorientation, stresses from pressure to succeed academically, and inadequate homestay conditions. Students' responses revealed considered decisions resulting from strategic weighting of options and choices. Respondents found differing and inconsistent policies and protocols among educational providers and lack of adequate oversight to be key explanatory factors for the issues confronting secondary-level international students.

Résumé

Cet article traite des résultats d'une étude pilote axée sur les expériences scolaires et l'adaptation sociale et culturelle d'étudiants internationaux venus au Canada pour apprendre l'anglais et obtenir un diplôme d'études secondaires de l'Ontario. N'étant pas de langue maternelle anglaise et n'ayant pas la citoyenneté canadienne, ils sont généralement amenés au Canada par leurs parents ou des agents de recrutement qui repartent après les avoir installés dans des familles d'accueil avec lesquelles ils n'ont eu pratiquement aucun contact préalable. Les répondants, éducateurs professionnels et étudiants focalisés pour la plupart, décrivent les sacrifices considérables que les parents de ces jeunes ont fait dans l'espoir que l'acquisition d'un anglais « légitime » permette à leur enfant d'accéder à la citoyenneté mondiale et à un avenir sûr. Les répondants adultes ont souligné que beaucoup d'étudiants étrangers qui viennent faire leurs études secondaires au Canada éprouvent des difficultés de socialisation en langue seconde, et qu'une minorité importante d'entre eux sont considérés comme étant « à risque » d'échec scolaire. Les témoignages des éducateurs ont décrit des problèmes d'adaptation spécifiques, notamment : la solitude et la désorientation, le stress lié à la pression de la réussite scolaire et des conditions d'hébergement inadéquates. Les réponses des étudiants étaient plus nuancées en ce qui concerne les problèmes d'adaptation, révélant des décisions réfléchies à la suite d'une pondération stratégique de leurs options et de leurs choix. Les répondants ont désigné les divergences et inconsistances des politiques et protocoles des prestataires de services éducatifs et le manque de supervision adéquate comme facteurs explicatifs clés des problèmes auxquels sont confrontés les étudiants étrangers du secondaire.

Overview

This article elucidates findings of a pilot study that focused on the school engagement and social and cultural adaptation of a cohort of early study abroad (ESA) students, aged 15–19, attending urban secondary schools in Ontario, Canada. For purposes of this research, the term *early study abroad* students refers to adolescents attending secondary school within a national context that is not their country of origin and being taught by individuals who have been socialized in a different language and culture than they have. This cohort of international students studying in Canada is part of a fast-growing demographic consisting of students from different countries of origin and linguistic backgrounds who have come to Canada for the purpose of obtaining an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). The study's main goal was to identify themes and issues that could serve as points of departure for a larger-scale, participatory action research collaboration with professional educators affiliated with Ontario secondary schools that hosted a significant number of international students. Specifically, we were seeking insights from different stakeholders into what secondary-level international students and their teachers and administrators viewed as the cohort's major challenges in terms of language socialization, school engagement, and social and cultural adaptation.

Federal and Provincial Contexts of Early Study Abroad

In recent years, through the proliferation of study abroad programs, international students have become part of the Canadian educational and economical fabric, and both federal and provincial governments have acknowledged the beneficial impact of this cohort on the national economy and Canada's global presence (Scott et al., 2015). In addition, over the past two decades Canada's share of the world's international student population has been steadily increasing, up by 200% from 2001 to 2013 (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2018). In 2016, Canada was the beneficiary of $21.6 billion spent by international students on tuition, accommodation, and other living expenses (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). In 2018, international students in Canada numbered 721,205, including close to 65,000 in the K–12 sector (Global Affairs Canada, 2019), up from 44,000 in 2015.

Provinces and territories approve (or "designate") schools that may enroll international students. These schools are known as designated learning institutions (DLIs). (Essentially, all registered primary and secondary schools in Canada are DLIs.) An international student applying for a study permit from Immigration Canada, the baseline of acceptance from Ontario province's perspective, must show an acceptance letter from a DLI (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). In Canada the recruitment of international students is primarily undertaken by public and private educational institutions. The federal government supports international education initiatives by streamlining student immigration policies and investing in marketing strategies promoting Canada as a destination for international students (Global Affairs Canada, 2019). Similarly, in its International Education Strategy the Ontario Ministry of Education (MoE) promotes "high quality programs and service for K–12 International students studying in Ontario" as a key goal (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 20), citing as a priority cultural exchange where "international students get to know their domestic classmates" through intercultural group activities both in class and outside of school.

Various push and pull factors have made Canada a top choice for Asian students seeking to participate in ESA programs. With regard to push factors: Difficult high school exit exams in China and South Korea have created a situation where relatively large numbers of adolescent international students from Asia find themselves in Ontario high schools (Chen, 2017; Liu, 2016).

Another push factor identified by students and teacher advocates has been the motivation to avoid military service in countries where such service is mandatory—Iran and Turkey, for example.

Pull factors beckoning ESA students to study in English-speaking contexts are numerous: Neoliberal ideologies have positioned language education as a source of value within a globalized educational context (Heller & Duchêne, 2012). In particular, English has solidified its position as a dominant *lingua franca* (Canagarajah, 2007; Fairclough, 1989; Pennycook, 2010; Schaller-Schwaner & Kirkpatrick, 2020).[1] Moreover, the Englishes spoken in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada are considered to reflect native speaker norms, thus providing their speakers with access to "global citizenship" (Heller, 2003) and positioning other speakers as nonnative, or "inauthentic." For this reason, increasing numbers of European parents, most of middle-class backgrounds, are drawn to Canada as a schooling destination for their children (Tamtik, 2019). Their goal is to have their children gain access to social mobility through the development of "globally valued skillsets," including fluent English.

In tandem, the gate to accessing "authentic" or "legitimate" forms of English (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) for international students through second language socialization has been opened through Canada's International Education Strategy, the Canadian government's aggressive policy of recruiting students for international study in Canada (Knight-Grofe & Rauh, 2016). Indeed, families of students from multiple national and linguistic backgrounds have cited the relatively straightforward student visa application process as a reason for choosing Canada over the United States as a study destination (Tamtik, 2019). An additional pull factor has been the relatively recent proliferation of privately owned secondary schools adopting a variety of on- and off-the-grid approaches ("the grid" here signifying the provincial curriculum and accompanying performance expectations), operating within a broad gamut of orientations, from enrichment to "credit mill." This said, "storefront" school entrepreneurs are not the only professional group to have recognized the situation's lucrative possibilities, as Ontario school boards consider devoting entire units or departments to the responsibilities of educating international/visa students, in effect integrating the practice of international student education into the structural fabric of publicly funded schooling (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

Both nonnative speakers of English and noncitizens of Canada, these students are often housed in residences with host families with whom they have no previous relationship. Media coverage of some of the more dramatic instances of fallout from this phenomenon has underscored that this student cohort experiences significant adaptation issues, including loneliness and disorientation, health problems, substance abuse, and disabling circumstances resulting from injudicious choices (e.g., Xing & Zhou, 2018). Academic research on the postarrival experiences of international students indicates that these students face challenges with regard to academic, social, and cultural integration, although these reports do not paint as alarming a portrait as stories that have garnered media attention. Researchers report student sentiments of social isolation and difficulties with linguistic and cultural adaptation (Kuo & Roysircar, 2004, 2006; Lindenberg, 2015; Nelson, 2013; Popadiuk, 2009, 2010; Popadiuk & Marshall, 2011; Wu & Tarc, 2021; Zheng, 2014), and gesture towards the systemic nature of these problems. However, by way of disclaimer, it should be mentioned that the overwhelming majority of this research was conducted outside Ontario.

Despite students requiring a minimum IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score to be accepted into school programs, these test scores guarantee neither academic

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[1] Review of research within French-speaking schools was beyond the scope of this preliminary study, where our main goal was to inform the design of a broader, participatory action research study within English-speaking schools in Ontario.

success nor social communication competencies (Badwan, 2020). Therefore, markers like scores on language tests such as IELTS are not necessarily indicators of preparedness for language learners (Pilcher & Richards, 2017). Popadiuk (2009, 2010) documented a complex transition process for ESA students in Vancouver and noted, in particular, the pressures that they experienced from expectations of successful academic performance and extreme loneliness. Yi (2013) found that *Jogi Yuhak* (Korean ESA students) in the United States felt stigmatized by being in the English as a second language (ESL) program: They internalized the ESL label as a deficiency with reference not only to their language skills but to their identity as well. Moreover, studies indicate that international students experience twofold isolation, at school and at home: Aware that they are considered separate from mainstream students and not well integrated into their host schools, at the same time these students are often neglected by their homestays (McKay & Wong, 1996; Yi, 2013), impeding their second language and cultural socialization. Indeed, a study by health care professionals found that secondary students who live in homestays were more vulnerable to poor health outcomes, with female students at greater risk of sexual abuse and cocaine use (Wong et al., 2010).

With regard to research on ways in which international students impact their host society's schools and school boards, and language learning more broadly, scholars have acknowledged these issues as both important and understudied aspects of study abroad programs (Duff, 2002; Song, 2010). Notwithstanding, a large majority of studies have addressed how the experience impacts the international student, rather than the reciprocal effects on schooling cultures and the organization of schooling in local contexts. Recently, some emphasis has been placed on the need to focus on intercultural communication within the ELT context and the complexity of associated practices (Kramsch & Hua, 2016), although to date we have been unable to identify studies that focus on the level and/or quality of cultural exchange between international students and their domestic counterparts (in or outside of school) in the Ontario arena, notwithstanding the MoE's aspirational goal of promoting interculturality. However, these lacunae may speak more to the gap between the English language learning classroom context and what is learned and valued within that context actually prepares students for realities beyond the classroom (Badwan, 2017). This said, we remind readers (and ourselves) that because of the relatively recent arrival of this student demographic on the provincial scene, ESA programs have not been extensively studied in the Ontario context.

Conceptual Frameworks
Two theoretical frameworks served as conceptual undergirding for this study, embedding work that engages not only our conception of linguistic and cultural socialization but also our understanding of the sociopolitical context in which participation in important processes of civic engagement such as teaching and learning take place. The first framework, *superdiversity and plurilingualism*, involves a re-visioning of the phenomenon of diversity in line with characteristics associated with recent trends in transnational migration and globalization, characteristics that yield cross-bordered communities (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; García, 2009). Within such a reconceptualization, sites localized within multilingual and multicultural societal contexts characterized by high levels of exchange of knowledge among cultures are considered to display a habitus reflecting a host of characteristics associated with linguistic, cultural, and (trans)national identity (Blommaert, 2013; Vertovec 2007, 2010). Language practices figure prominently within such dynamic interplays of variables: The term *plurilingualism* has been used (see, e.g., Little et al., 2013) to characterize societal states where a diversification of languages is available and where

individuals call upon multiple linguistic repertoires as they "cross borders either physically or virtually" (García, 2009, p. 54).

Additionally, we learn from feminist, postcolonial, and sociolinguistic writings that categories such as where, when, and in what language individuals communicate are not determined a priori but rather are produced through people's interactions in particular situations of language and dialect contact (Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1999; de Certeau, 1997; Eckert, 2000; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Pratt, 1987; Spivak, 1993). Indeed, research on processes of language maintenance and shift within and across time has demonstrated that various enabling or constraining factors do not necessarily have the same effects for different actors from the same background, or even for the same actors at different times (Schecter & Bayley, 2002, 2004). In situations of language contact, which Pratt (1987) has termed the "contact zone," a fair amount of online decision-making takes place that is not circumscribed by schematic behaviour related to generalizations about who speaks what language to whom. It therefore follows from Pratt's view that multilingualism should be studied less as a function of attributes of individual speakers or ethnic groups and more in terms of interactional zones within which speakers work out social meanings and negotiate social differences. In this light, this framework is additionally useful in that it provides us with a working method to situate international students as distinguishable from domestic "nationals" or "transmigrants" immersed in a process that involves a permanent move to a new country.

A second conceptual framework situates this inquiry within an engaged policy and practices perspective (Davis, 2014). While our research proceeds from the understanding that schools are places where state ideologies relative to language and teaching are converted into practice (Lewis et al., 2003), as socially engaged researchers we would also want to explain relations entailed in the proliferation of ESA in Canada by examining how evolving politically situated perspectives result in the negotiation of new educational practices, or adaptation of extant ones, both locally and on a broader societal level (Lin et al., 2002; Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Norton, 2000). Guidelines for the conduct of such inquiry are provided by Ricento and Hornberger (1996) in their elucidation of "the layers of planning and policy" (p. 408) that undergird language policy and planning processes at different levels—from the outer layers of broad policy objectives as articulated in official regulations and guidelines, through their discursive reconfigurations by key actors in various institutional settings, to their interpretation, contestation, or adaptation by subjects at the local level. In conformity with Ricento and Hornberger's schema, we seek to peel back the various processes, levels, and agents—at the federal (macro), provincial (meso), and local levels—through which policy planning and practices are realized and to draw conclusions where possible regarding how these different layers interrelate and interact.

Further, within an engaged educational policy perspective, actors at the local—in this case, board- and school-based—levels are positioned not as unwitting reproducers, but rather as being at the heart of educational policy, given their strategic ability to transform institutional settings and bring about educational change (Solomon & Allen, 2001). Moreover, research within this perspective presents an opportunity to involve professional educators at the macro, meso, and local infrastructural levels in dialogic processes that identify pockets of agency for interrupting extant schooling practices and influencing the outcomes of social processes that affect the lives of at-risk language minority students. Such an orientation, as well, paves the way for social critique (Low & Merry, 2010; Tollefson, 1995, 2013) of an educational phenomenon, ESA students, that has become an integral component of the schooling landscape in Ontario and yet is still largely under the radar.

Methodology

The main goal of this qualitative study, conducted in 2018–19, was to obtain an evidence-based appraisal of what various stakeholders viewed as the cohort's major issues, or challenges, with regard to both academic socialization in accessing the Ontario secondary-level curriculum and social and cultural adaptation, to inform the design of a larger-scale, participatory action research project. Primary data included one-on-one interviews with 16 adult participants and a focus group discussion with nine current secondary-level ESA students. Key elicitations in both the interviews with adult respondents and focus group discussion with students addressed challenges ESAs experienced with regard to (a) English language acquisition and proficiency; (b) access to secondary-level subject matter; and (c) issues related to social and cultural adaptation. We were also interested in additional supports, if any, provided by either the board or the province to ESA students and their professional educators and other mentors, and in respondents' views about supports that they would like to receive or cultivate. We address these issues in our Findings section below. Although not an initial goal of this study, in the Findings section we also discuss the policies and protocols that undergird the experiences of ESA students in Ontario schools, as respondents found this area of focus to represent a key explanatory factor for the academic and social issues confronting secondary-level international students in the province.

Participants

The study involved 25 participants representing different stakeholder groups and distributed across three school boards—two nondenominational, one Catholic—and two private schools within Ontario. Of the 25 participants, 15 were professional educators, administrators, and board-assigned guidance personnel affiliated with a specific school board or school; one was a homestay provider; and nine were ESA students.

In the schools with which respondents for this study were affiliated, the largest representations of international students were from China, South Korea, Iran, Vietnam, and Turkey, with small numbers from Latin America (Mexico, Brazil) at each school. Eight of the nine ESA students who participated in our focus group were enrolled in Grade 10, 11, or 12 at the time of the study; the ninth student was a recent graduate. Student respondents were from the following countries of origin: China, South Korea, Iran, Vietnam, and Turkey.

Data Collection Strategies

Data collection methods for the study included: hour-long interviews with each of the 16 adult respondents and the one student who had graduated, with information elicited by means of an interview protocol; and a focus group session of one-hour duration with the eight current ESA students. Interviews were of the s*tructured*, *sequenced* variety: that is, all participants were asked the same questions in the same order (Schecter & Bayley, 2002). Interviews with adult respondents addressed such topics as: educators' perceptions of students' orientations to the host society and school; educators' perceptions of enabling and constraining factors associated with students' learning of academic subject matter, acquisition of the societal language, social adaptation, and acculturation; how the issues described were being anticipated and addressed by the programs, policies, and protocols that their educational institution had in place; student well-being concerns associated with homestay and guardianship conditions; teachers' conceptions of an ideal educational experience for ESA students. The interview protocol was adapted for use in the focus group session with students, with less emphasis placed on policies and protocols and additional

attention devoted to following up on students' contributions with regard to their envisioned goals for and lived experiences of studying abroad.

The study's methodology involved a cyclical and recursive process (Boeje, 2010) of gathering and analyzing data related to teachers' and students' perceptions of the issues confronting international students at the secondary level, identifying overlapping and divergent categories and themes, to the end of identifying and developing components of a future activist participatory research project. Interviews and focus group discussion were audio recorded. Constant comparison methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) were used to identify and analyze patterns across the data and identify emergent themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). To prepare interview and focus group data for analysis, select portions of audio recordings were transcribed. Transcriptions and other data—including observational and summary notes—were organized into tentative categories that recorded regularities and patterns related to the research foci (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). By iteratively examining these data through a process of analytic deduction (Goetz & Lecompte, 1984), we hoped to also bring into view differentiated approaches and strategies that could help promote the academic engagement and social integration of international students within the Ontario secondary school context.

Findings

Academic Socialization and Curricular Access

With regard to access to academic subject matter: in addition to the linguistic challenges around developing target language proficiency one would anticipate in connection with ESL learners, international students are required to acclimatize to what for most of them is an unfamiliar academic culture. Many come from schooling systems that promote rote learning and are not accustomed to asking questions in class or volunteering responses that demonstrate independent thinking. Teachers report that notions of "creativity" or "voice" are foreign, as students have not developed a comfort level with student-centred pedagogy. According to practitioners, presentation is a huge stressor for ESA students: "They find speaking in front of an audience of peers and educators to be very intimidating." Teachers underscored that ESA students had particular difficulty with word problems in mathematics, not only because of unfamiliar vocabulary—their teachers are adept at enlisting cloze exercises that offer students practice in inferring missing lexical items—but also because the very idea of word problems in mathematics is foreign. This is not a genre they have encountered in their previous mathematics schooling.

Educators also underscored that the assessment protocols and policies used in the Ontario educational system differ significantly from the routines the students were socialized into in their home countries. In particular, students find teachers' exhortations to "show your process" or "give reasons for your answers" confusing when linked to mathematics pedagogy where they are accustomed to answers being either right or wrong. "I do a lot of scaffolding … spend a lot of time explaining," volunteered one mathematics teacher.

A major concern for teachers was the students' transition from ESL classes, where the curriculum is somewhat flexible, to academic English, with a standardized curriculum which all students need to pass to receive an OSSD. There wasn't uniformity among educators' views on how many years of ESL students should be required to take before transitioning to the academic English stream. A senior-level administrator in the public sector volunteered that within their board the international students' academic outcomes are comparable with those of regular day students, "provided they take 5 years to finish, and not 4." However, teachers were conflicted about enforcing this condition. Several respondents, while acknowledging ESA students' linguistic and

academic challenges, were not convinced that the academic considerations outweighed those related to sustaining students' morale: "The more steps we put in their way, like ESL E, the farther away they see the goal." In addition, several voiced a practical concern that parents may not be able to afford an additional year of tuition: "The parents work so hard," one administrator observed, embedding this comment in a lengthy critique of the stereotype of international students as representing a class of foreign elites. A majority of respondents considered the issue of an additional year's tuition a major factor in "increasing students' anxiety about succeeding academically."

Before leaving this topic, we would note that all school-based practitioners—classroom teachers, school administrators, and guidance counsellors—found international students to be hard-working. (Some even noted that they considered ESA students to be "more industrious" than other categories of students.) This said, there was a lack of consensus among adult respondents on the proportion of ESA students they would qualify as "academically successful." One board-level administrator showed statistics from their board to support the assertion that "international students have comparable outcome measures as regular day students"; however, several of the educators interviewed noted that a significant number—one classroom-based practitioner claimed, "a third"—of their ESA students were "at risk for failure." By *at risk,* they meant that the students were not currently getting passing marks and required additional English language support.

According to respondents, the discovery that the risky venture of sending their child overseas for study may not have a successful outcome proves all the more bitter medicine for families because substantial numbers of students are lured to Ontario schools by aggressive recruiters who assure their families that "98% of VISA students go to University" following completion of the OSSD, a claim that is not substantiated. Complicating this issue is the fact that marks allocated by the private schools (referred to by educators working within the public system as "storefront schools") are considered "inflated," thereby encouraging students to try to "game the system" by enrolling in English classes in a private school while taking the rest of their courses at a public secondary school nearby. A source within the MoE confirmed this perception, expressing an additional concern that because of these questionable practices the most deserving students may not be those who receive scholarships to top-tier institutions of higher learning.

Social and Cultural Adaptation
With regard to students' social and cultural adaptation, issues that were cited as problematic for international students, underscored by both adult and youth respondents, were: missing friends and family members, difficulties in adapting to food customs and the weather, problems in arranging medical coverage and transport between homestay and school, and high stress levels because of pressure to succeed academically. Adult respondents observed that unlike other categories of immigrant students who generally arrive with their families, ESA students are prone to "clustering" with students from the same ethnic background—partially to compensate for the absence of family and also because their waking hours are less stressful if they are not required to spend all of them communicating in a foreign language they do not master. These conditions, they elaborated, may be beneficial for mother tongue and heritage culture maintenance but are not ideal for fostering linguistic socialization and cultural integration into the host society.

However, a different perspective was presented in the focus group meeting with ESA students, where a majority of students expressed a desire to connect with Canadian youth. The problem, they specified, was that they didn't know how to proceed: "It's not easy to make friends. Most of the students I associate with in the school are talk mates, not friends." The issue of perceived

constraints associated with ESA students connecting to peers in their new schooling environment underscored the underdeveloped nature of the interculturality goal that is promoted (but not elaborated) in the Ontario MoE's international education policy.

Another key impediment that international students encounter soon after arrival has to do with negotiating the health bureaucracy in Ontario, which may differ significantly from that found in many of their home countries. Newly arrived students experience difficulties in negotiating an immunization, or obtaining and following through on a diagnosis of strep throat, for example. Food, as well, surfaced as a major acculturation issue, although not necessarily in the manner reported by adult respondents. At times students reported that they missed their traditional ethnic foods; however, just as often students became accustomed to the foods they were introduced to through the school cafeteria—hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza—and did not find the prospect of coming home in the evening to a crock pot of cooked food that had been sitting on a counter for some time appealing.

On the whole, separated from their families and confined to homestay accommodations that did not necessarily include contact with representatives, activities, and artefacts representing the host culture, ESA students were prone to feelings of isolation and anxiety, causing some to lose sleep and to withdraw from engagement with fellow students, teachers, and the academic curriculum. Several of the boys reported spending an inordinate amount of time on online gaming; and both teachers and students reported difficulty with separating students from their devices for a sufficiently long time to entice them into social activity. Several educators reported that because of their fragile state, a minority could not muster the energy required to make it to school, causing them to fall behind academically.

These "symptoms of depression," in the parlance of the two guidance counsellors, are especially visible in the second term when normally high-achieving students become overwhelmed by academic demands and manifest as "more and more on the edge." School-based practitioners agreed that this transition between first and second term, when the newness of the study abroad experience wears off, is a particularly vulnerable time for international students. A senior-level administrator whose board had conducted a major study on international students' mental health attested that "stress levels of international students from East Asia" were found to be uncommonly high. They attributed this situation to "intense pressure from home to succeed academically and get into good universities." Another respondent volunteered, "They carry the weight of the world on their shoulders." The one homestay provider interviewed concurred with this perception, and cited an additional exacerbating factor: "A lot of homestay people they either don't care or they don't understand the system. … Students at that age need someone that they can really talk with."

School-Based Supports

In terms of supports provided to struggling students, adult respondents representing the public boards emphasized that there were significantly more supports and resources (such as counselling, workshops, additional academic support at lunchtime and/or after school, social events) available to international students enrolled within the public school system than to those attending private schools. Students who experienced both public and private secondary schools within Ontario confirmed that there were a greater number and variety of academic and emotional supports available to them within the public system, and that additionally they found the quality of instruction within the public system to be on the whole superior to that they experienced within a private school. ESA students' decisions to take some classes each year or all classes in a pivotal year at a private establishment depended mainly on their understanding of how the public and

private systems compared in grade point averages and how these differences translated into acceptances to reputable institutions of higher learning within the province.

Policies and Protocols

Although not an initial focus of the study, all respondents cited "inconsistencies" in policies and protocols among educational providers and lack of adequate oversight ("no system to follow them") as key explanatory factors for the academic and social adaptation issues confronting ESA students. Indeed, one of the more striking findings from the pilot study was the degree of variation reported between the various jurisdictions with regard to policies and protocols associated with the organization of schooling for secondary-level international students—with practices concerning custodianship, counselling provision, and homestay assignment varying from board to board and, at times, school to school. For example, policies regarding tuition and arrangements for room and board were different across the three public boards and the two private schools from which we drew respondents. Both the boards and the private service providers are aware of the rates that the volatile market will tolerate: one private school proprietor volunteered that their school's practice was to charge $1,000 less in tuition fees than the costs to attend the school board that served the catchment in which the private school was located, thus undercutting the publicly funded school up the street. The same respondent lamented that they could charge even more if their school was located in a municipality served by a different school board that charged a higher tuition fee.

Protocols also varied from board to board and school to school with regard to custodianship of students who are, from a legal perspective, minors. In some jurisdictions, the student's parent or parents determine their "legal custodian"; in others, a single administrator associated with a cluster of international students attending a given school, or group of schools, is designated custodian for a defined cohort. All administrators and guidance personnel interviewed lamented the "inconsistency" of these various policies and practices across the province and related stories of specific "struggles" they endured in seeking to contact a student's custodian to obtain or relay crucial information when a problem arose. (A case in point involving a persistent problem with bedbugs resulted in the student changing their educational venue to study at a nearby private school where they would be provided with different accommodations.) The same respondents also volunteered that often the custodian, when reached, would not have the appropriate contact information at hand for the school to adequately advocate for a student who was "falling through the cracks," and that either the school or the custodian would need to track down the recruiting agent to obtain the needed information. With regard to medical treatment, even after contact with the custodian or homestay family could be established, school representatives were not always confident that these individuals were sufficiently familiar with the health system in Ontario to make decisions regarding the student's well-being in an expeditious manner.

Notwithstanding relentless probing, clear answers from administrators regarding how homestay allocations were determined were not forthcoming. The lead author would be directed to other administrators elsewhere within the system or to the board website, none of which were informative in this regard. Nor does the Ontario MoE have a fixed or even suggested protocol for this process. In two boards, if students have family members or close family friends living in Ontario, arrangements may be made with one of these relatives that include room, board, and possibly travel to and from the host school. From talking with students, we gleaned that for those who require assistance with homestay accommodations, either the recruiter or an administrator representing the host school board will often direct the family to a homestay vendor, such as

Homestay Canada; the vendor will then send the student's profile to a prospective homestay provider.

Equally often, however, it seems this process unfolds by "word of mouth." One of the three boards represented in the sample solicits applications from individuals who wish to become "homestay providers" and shares this information with the parents of newly recruited ESA students. According to a senior administrator for an alternate board, the board or school prefers to choose the homestay for the student, based on location and availability. Administrators were unable or unwilling to respond to follow-up questions about how prospective homestay providers and their facilities were vetted. The homestay provider interviewed volunteered, "No one seems to be in charge," and a student concurred, commenting astutely, "The Ministry hasn't put in rules yet." Additionally, from participants in the focus group we learned that some of the older students rent accommodations—apartments, flats—and share the costs with other students attending the same school. This practice, however, is not sanctioned by all school boards in Ontario and is not officially on the books for one of the boards participating in this study. Although a guidance counsellor clarified that students "are supposed to live in homestays until they are 18," according to our student respondents in some cases this protocol may be overlooked.

Discussion

While the pilot study produced a lack of consensus on the issue of the need for native language versus ESL support, we chose to interpret this finding as a productive oppositional tension rather than an either/or proposition. As a result, we defined a need to foster opportunities for interactions between ESA students and "people who can speak their language" to support and nurture their emotional needs and wellness in a foreign country, and at the same time to augment opportunities for students to practise and take risks in the societal language to enhance their English proficiency. Consequently, in the school-based project that we designed subsequently, we integrated these two strategies, creating opportunities for students to interact in their first language through a strategically designed mentorship program involving senior-level students in interaction with newly arrived ESAs, and also embedding occasions to socialize with "caring adults"—teachers, guidance personnel, administrators, and researchers—in the context of a robust program of extra-school activities. As well, within an engaged policy and planning perspective, through coordinated collaborations with teaching and guidance staff, we created a series of "orientation workshops" that familiarized ESA students with expeditious strategies to use in: obtaining health care services and coverage, registering for future courses, modifying homestay conditions, coordinating travel between homestay and school, transitioning from ESL to academic English, and enhancing their involvement in extracurricular and social activities (Schecter & Bell, 2021.)

The rub here, of course, is that the school boards are just starting to discover the lucrative potential of this superdiversity phenomenon and to get people and strategies in place to deal with the various issues that arise. In the absence of Ministry protocols, these vary from board to board, and often from school to school; and so teachers and guidance personnel themselves do not always know how to address these issues and whom to go to when problems arise. In the context of this particular study, with regard to the education of ESA students we found policies at the federal and provincial levels overlapping and symbiotic, and policies at the board level and below inconsistent and divergent, pointing to a need for change at the meso and local levels. This said, we do not observe individuals in the higher echelons of school boards calling for synchronization of policies and protocols with regard to aspects of ESA schooling discussed in this article; nor is the Ontario MoE proactive in this regard.

Those who study the political science of such systemic arrangements may contend that it is in the interest of the new managerialism to keep things this way (Clarke & Newman, 1993; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Lynch, 2014)—i.e., with decentred accountability. On the ground, however, we note growing unrest. With the pandemic having severely restricted possibilities for face-to-face interaction, thereby curtailing opportunities to create and sustain community among international students, advocates for these youths worry increasingly about the danger of members of this cohort joining the ranks of "missing" or "off-the-grid" students who no longer show up for online or in-person instruction.

Conclusion

Perhaps the most illuminating finding of this study concerns an emerging consensus over the profiles of families who elect to send their children for study abroad at the secondary level. Countering prevalent stereotypes of international students as members of global elites, respondents reported that a majority of these youths' parents or caregivers have made considerable economic and personal sacrifices in the hope that acquisition of "legitimate" English will give their child access to global citizenship and a secure future. A profile emerges of overburdened adolescents who, in addition to confronting challenges related to academic socialization in a foreign language and culture and estrangement from family and friends at a vulnerable age, must contend on a daily basis with apprehension over the possibility of becoming disappointments to their struggling families. This portrait is far removed from the commonly held stereotype of the international student as "originating from a wealthy, two-parent family with servants," in the words of one respondent, and accounts for why stress levels of ESA students are found to be higher than those of their Canadian-born or immigrant counterparts.

It was indeed the case—we learned from student collaborators in a subsequent participatory, school-based study—that international students often asked to take the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT),[2] one of a series of standardized tests they are required to pass to secure a high school leaving certificate, earlier than their concerned teachers would have advised, to avoid registering (and paying) for an additional year of secondary school. These students understood that their language proficiency level was not sufficiently robust to ensure a good result for their crucial final year of secondary school; however, they felt "intense pressure to succeed as quickly as they can" as they understood that their families could not afford a fifth year of tuition. And so they rolled the dice, hoping the result would enable them to secure admission to a reputed institution of higher education.

Structurally, one may conclude that these students represent an exploited cohort within the larger institution of Canadian schooling; and it behooves us to inquire why the substantial profits incurred as a result of aggressive recruitment practices are not funnelled automatically into creating the additional resources that students and educators who participated in this study indicated were needed. We see little evidence of systemic, or even school-based, efforts to provide additional learning supports for the significant minority of ESA students considered at risk for academic failure, or create conditions that would prevent more vulnerable students from going "missing" or "off-the-grid." Moreover, it is consistent with the lack of responsible oversight revealed by this study that there continues to be a dearth of systemic vehicles through which professional educators

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[2] The OSSLT is administered on a provincewide basis by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an arm's-length agency of the Ontario government.

and administrators have opportunities to explore and unpack the personal and institutional biases that may contribute to the problematic conditions described here.

We may speculate that such inhospitable conditions, including lack of substantive opportunities for intercultural exchange among international and domestic students, would not be tolerated for the children of the privileged classes. Although such analysis is beyond the scope of this study, we cannot turn away from the spectre of racism and discrimination as a key explanatory factor underlying the social and cultural adaptation issues underscored by respondents. It is worth noting that prior to the onset of the pandemic, one Ontario school board had developed a plan to rent prefab units the following year to house the overflow of international students as a result of a particularly successful recruitment campaign. The implications of this development for superdiversity should not be underestimated, for it foreshadows the abandonment on the part of Ontario public schooling of a commitment to a view of public schools as intercultural spaces (Luke, 2011) and a concept of educational reform as enacted within interstitial areas in which practices engaging different cultural subjects and language varieties take place (Schecter et al., 2014). Our greatest apprehension for the future of ESA education in Canada is that this vision will be forsaken. At the same time, an equally unsettling worry is that the most zealous in the arena, in their frenzy to expand the purses of a public bureaucracy that traditionally has enjoyed little entrepreneurial latitude, will continue to exploit the lucrative potential of this endeavour without recognition that, in the words of one of our teacher respondents, "someone needs to take responsibility for the fact that they're kids."

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