



Kirsty Johnston

Kirsty Johnston is the NZ Herald's education reporter

## Children lead the way as cultures combine

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Confucius Institute manager Janine Chin says New Zealand schools need to equip their students with the Chinese language. Photo / Jason Dorday

**The weight of New Zealand's superdiverse future rests heavily on our schools, but cultural learning needs more than just lip-service, writes Kirsty Johnston in the second part of our series.**

By Kirsty Johnston

To peek into a classroom in certain parts of Auckland is to understand what our country's ethnic make-up will be in a quarter of a century's time. Some schools have no European students at all. Some of the students speak very little English. There are classrooms set aside for Muslim prayer or Mandarin learning, or for Maori immersion, where te reo is spoken all day.

At Henderson Intermediate, for example, the students are a multicultural medley. Ask, "where are you from?" and the answer will be something like, "I was born in New Zealand but my dad is Tongan and my mum is from Samoa so we speak both those at home and I'm learning Chinese because mum is half Chinese as well."

Race is of no particular concern to the kids, though they're proud of where they come from. Judgment isn't big either; as one Muslim girl says when asked about her headscarf: "No one cares." Principal Wendy Esera says one of the school's priorities is to teach the children

tolerance and acceptance, to normalise having people from many different backgrounds living together.

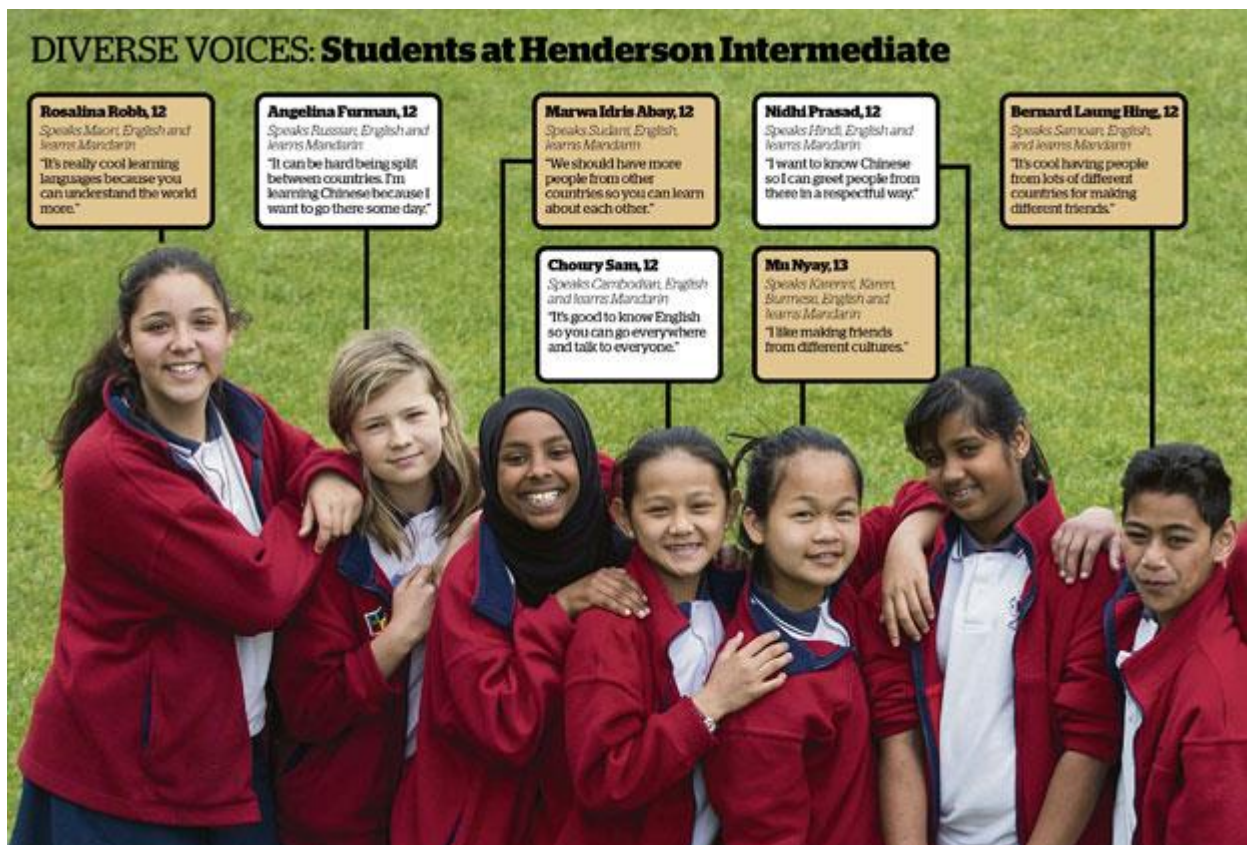
"It's one of the most exciting things about today's schools - the students bring so many different things to the table. We are rich in culture," she says.

"Teaching kids that diversity is a good thing is key in terms of our children growing up to be successful and happy citizens."

However, it's not an easy road. Although Henderson is well set up - with a Maori immersion class and Mandarin teachers, and a good English for Speakers of Other Languages (Esol) programme - not all schools are on the same page.

Schools outside Auckland, for example, have much lower diversity levels, with some classrooms in Otago and Southland still entirely European, meaning the coming change in demographics - where Pasifika, Maori and Asian people make up half the population - will still require a large adjustment.

And while cultural diversity is supposed to be part of the curriculum, a recent Education Review Office report found "limited evidence" that it was understood.

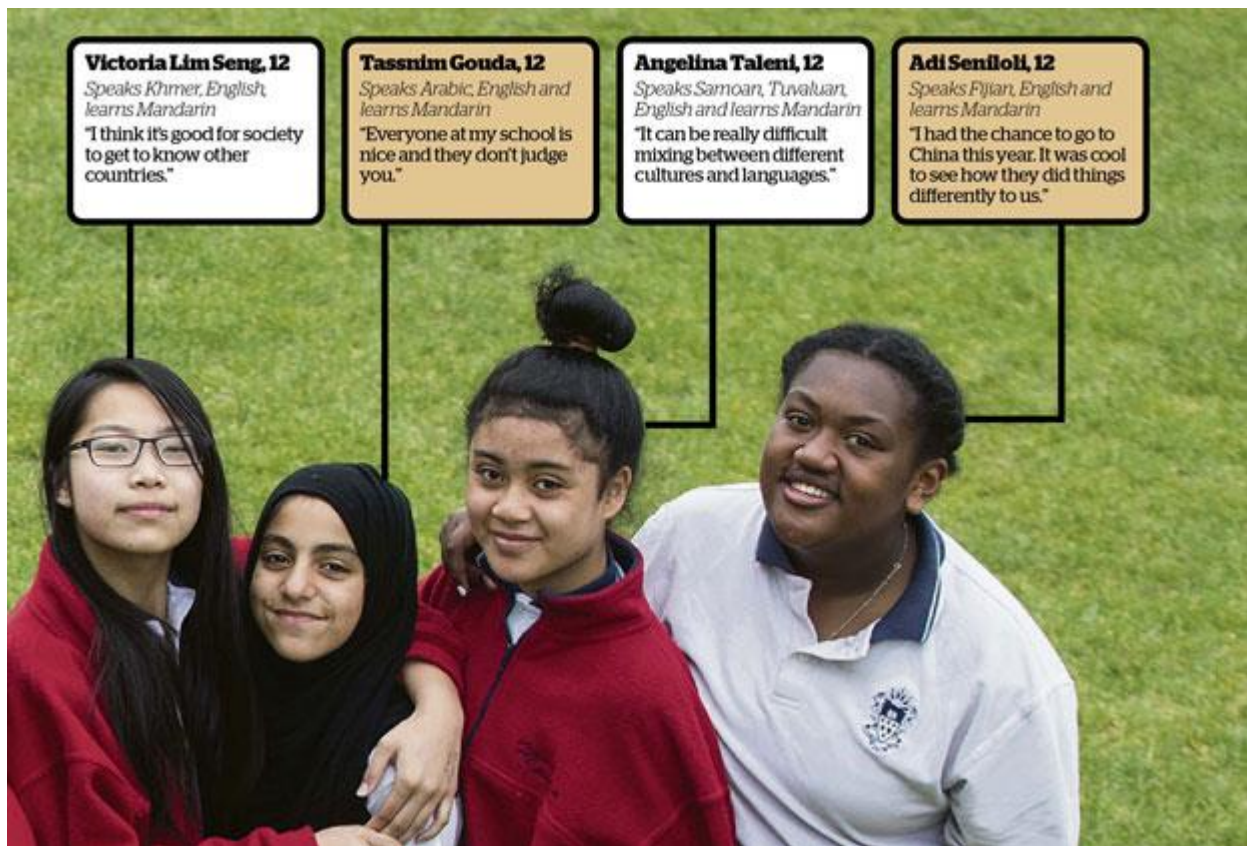


"Many teachers appeared to lack knowledge about how to engage with culturally diverse families and use the resources these students and their families can potentially provide to enrich the learning of all students," the report said.

A new paper says cultural awareness needs to be taken more seriously for the sake of the next generation.

The Superdiversity Stocktake, by Mai Chen, chairwoman of the Superdiversity Centre of Law, Policy and Business, is aimed at raising awareness of demographic changes.

One of its messages is that there needs to be more investment in education and training of Maori, Pacific and Asian youth because they will comprise the growing population of the New Zealand workforce and will need additional assistance over New Zealand European youth to do so.



There are issues of culture and religion to be addressed, the study says, as different cultures often want their views of teaching or faith to be incorporated into schooling.

The biggest issue by far is language - teaching English is vital as more migrant children arrive in New Zealand, the Stocktake says.

Hilary Smith, head of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Aotearoa New Zealand (Tesolanz), says the provision of Esol varies across the country.





"In some places, such as Auckland, Esol is working really well. There are trained teachers, bilingual teacher aides, schools for international students and adult migrants.

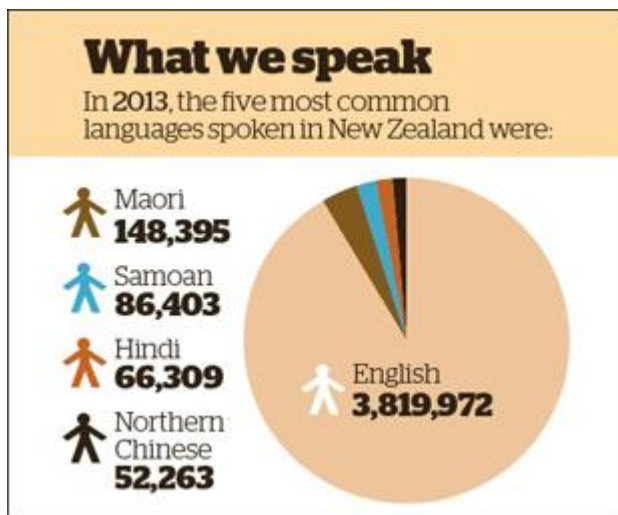
"But in other places they have to mix all of that together - there may be a mainstream teacher who has to look after the one or two children in her class, or there are schools who've never done Esol but suddenly have to catch up if there's a wave of people from a new place."

Dr Smith said one big improvement would be if all teachers had Esol training. Currently, it is an optional part of teacher education.

Equally important as learning English, however, is having a second language - whether it was retaining children's native language or promoting learning another at school.

AUT's School of Language and Culture head Sharon Harvey has been pushing for a national language strategy to ensure language learning does not continue its decline.

Twenty per cent of students in New Zealand secondary schools learn a second language - the lowest participation rate in over 80 years.



Dr Harvey said policy makers had put language learning in the "too-hard basket", but it should be deemed urgent.

"The first thing is to recognise diversity in schools by assessing children in more than one language - credit the kids who are multi-lingual. At the moment they're not counted, all we see is the need for remedial English," she said.

"Then we need to look at the instruction in schools as well."

Dr Harvey said research showed children should be taught in their native language until age 10, but that was not supported by policy.

Funding had been cut for Pasifika resources and the few immersion Samoan classrooms were done by dedicated schools and teachers with minimal support.

"If there was greater emphasis we could have classrooms that were in half Chinese or half Samoan," she said. "English is going to be important for a long time and we need high quality English but we should be able to develop bilingual education to a high level as well."

The ministry of education said there were currently no plans to offer assessment in other languages. Individual schools were able to use their operational funding to run bilingual classrooms should they choose, it said.

## Equipped for Asian century

The number of children learning Chinese is booming, with advocates concerned it's growing so fast the education system can't keep up.

A programme called Confucius Classrooms has seen a dozen primary school sites set up with Mandarin language assistants around Auckland, with 20,000 children expected to be learning in the next six years.

However Tony Browne from the New Zealand China Council said while the numbers were expanding at primary level, secondary schools did not have the same resources.

"Only 60 secondary schools offer Chinese language as a subject, and they're catering for 4200 students. This is seriously inadequate to meet future demand," Mr Browne said.

Auckland Confucius Institute manager Janine Chin said as the world moved towards the "Asian century", knowing how to engage with China would be increasingly important. "Regardless what part of New Zealand you're in the demographics are changing. We need to equip our students." Ms Chin said they also wanted immersion classrooms to help Chinese students retain their language.

### **The series**

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**Today:** Changing learning

**Tomorrow:** Changing families

**Thursday:** Changing democracy

**Friday:** Changing business

**Saturday:** Changing future.