Expat Child Syndrome (ECS)

Addressing Challenges for Non-English Speaking Primary School-Aged Children (5-12) in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the adaptation challenges faced by non-English speaking expatriate children in Aotearoa New Zealand primary schools, identifying a psychosocial phenomenon framed as "Expat Child Syndrome" (ECS). Rooted in a personal family experience and grounded in Kaupapa Māori values, the study employs a sequential mixed-methods approach encompassing semi-structured interviews, surveys, and prototype development.

Data gathered from parents, teachers, and principals reveal that while schools express strong intent to welcome newly arrived learners, systemic limitations such as time constraints, inadequate training, and language barriers, often undermine effective inclusion. Teachers reported high emotional distress, withdrawal, and identity loss among children, while principals tended to overestimate staff confidence in managing such transitions. The research identifies a “confidence gap” between leadership intent and classroom reality, coupled with the fragility of current strategies such as buddy systems.

To address these gaps, three technology-enabled interventions were designed:

- New Kiwi Kids Hub – a digital tūrangawaewae supporting families through curated stories and practical guidance;
- Culture in a Click – a micro-learning platform for teachers providing quick cultural insights and greetings; and
- VoiceLink AI Interpreter – a context-aware translation tool enabling empathetic communication.

Together, these prototypes embody whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and ako, offering scalable, culturally responsive pathways to mitigate ECS and strengthen the inclusion and wellbeing of expatriate children in Aotearoa New Zealand.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Rationale

This project arose from a **deeply personal event**. A misunderstanding between the researcher's non-English-speaking son and a classmate. That exposed the barriers faced by expatriate children in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. The incident revealed how **language limitations, cultural misinterpretation, and lack of communication tools** can transform a minor playground conflict into social exclusion, igniting the study's central inquiry:

> *What innovative approaches, including disruptive technologies, can support non-English-speaking expatriate children in adapting to New Zealand primary schools?*

The work frames these experiences through the lens of **Expat Child Syndrome (ECS)**, a set of adjustment-related stress, isolation, and identity loss, and positions it within the broader **Third Culture Kid (TCK)** discourse. ECS differs from TCK in its immediacy: it focuses on the **first months of adaptation**, where emotional and linguistic dissonance are most acute.

Context and Literature Foundations

The research highlights global findings linking **relocation** to heightened socio-emotional and behavioural risks. In Aotearoa, approximately **1,800 primary-aged learners** currently hold student visas from **non-English-speaking countries**, representing a growing demographic whose needs remain insufficiently addressed. Existing support typically relies on **ESOL programmes** and informal **buddy systems**, neither of which tackle the emotional dimensions of adaptation. The study therefore integrates **Kaupapa Māori pedagogies**—particularly **whanaungatanga** (relationships), **manaakitanga** (care), and **ako** (reciprocal learning), as a culturally grounded framework capable of humanising these experiences for all learners.

Methodology

A **sequential mixed-methods design** was implemented across three phases:

1. **Qualitative Phase – Interviews and Testimonials**
   Conducted with 8 parents, 3 teachers, and 1 principal, complemented by 6 anonymous testimonials submitted through *newkiwikids.co.nz*. Themes such as "loss of identity," "silence," and "food shame" emerged, illuminating emotional undercurrents invisible in school records.
2. **Quantitative Phase – Surveys**
   Surveys were distributed to 143 principals and 61 teachers, yielding 37 responses. Results revealed acute resource and training deficits: **90 % of teachers** had received no ECS-related preparation, and **91 %** cited lack of time as the foremost barrier.
3. **Design Phase – Prototype Development**
   Findings were translated into tangible solutions through **user-centred design**, resulting in three interconnected prototypes.

Ethical approval (Ref MTF.8888.249) governed all phases, ensuring anonymity and the protection of participants. Māori ethical principles guided engagement and reciprocity, treating participants as partners in knowledge creation.

Key Findings

- **Visible vs Invisible Struggles:** Children with limited English display observable distress (silence, withdrawal, or aggression) whereas fluent children often experience hidden identity loss under expectations of quick assimilation.
- **Confidence Gap:** Principals reported higher confidence in staff readiness than teachers expressed themselves, exposing a structural disconnect that leaves needs unaddressed until crises occur.
- **Fragile Support Structures:** Buddy systems, though well-intentioned, can create dependency on a single peer rather than broad belonging.

- **Cultural Identity Erosion:** Several children rejected home-culture practices (e.g., traditional foods) to avoid stigma, demonstrating internalised cultural shame.
- **Systemic Limitations:** Teachers overwhelmingly identified **time, communication barriers, and insufficient resources** as persistent obstacles, confirming that goodwill alone cannot sustain inclusive practice.

Discussion

The analysis re-frames ECS not as an individual deficiency but as a **systemic communication failure**. Behavioural incidents often mask linguistic or cultural distress—what one principal aptly termed "**behaviour is communication**." Thus, effective responses must amplify children's voices and reduce reliance on overextended teachers. By embedding **Kaupapa Māori relational values** and leveraging **context-aware AI**, the study positions technology as a bridge—not a replacement—for human empathy.

Design Solutions

1. **New Kiwi Kids Hub** – A moderated digital platform providing anonymous family testimonials and practical navigation guides ("Understanding play-based learning," "What is a whānau class?"). It acts as a **digital tūrangawaewae**, building collective resilience rather than complaint-driven discourse.
2. **Culture in a Click** – An **audio-first micro-learning tool** delivering 10-minute cultural primers and instant native-language greetings ("The Golden Minute") to equip time-poor teachers with actionable empathy.
3. **VoiceLink AI Interpreter** – A **context-aware translation assistant** designed to capture emotional nuance in multilingual exchanges, reducing misinterpretation and promoting equitable participation.

Together, these innovations reflect the **Te Kotahitanga** principles of shared power, reciprocal learning, and relational trust, operationalising Māori pedagogy within a digital, multicultural framework.

Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates that **inclusive education** for expatriate children requires simultaneous attention to **language, culture, and emotion**. Current systems address the first but overlook the latter two. By merging **ethnographic insight**, **empirical data**, and **applied design**, the research delivers both theoretical understanding and practical prototypes ready for pilot testing in schools. It also models how **emerging technologies**, when grounded in **indigenous values**, can extend human connection rather than replace it. Ultimately, the work aspires to ensure that every newly arrived child in Aotearoa New Zealand, regardless of language or origin, can cross the school gate feeling **seen, supported, and able to thrive**.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This project began from a **deeply personal experience**. What follows is the story that inspired this research: **a father's perspective on the silent struggles his son faced**.

Drawing on an academic background in graphic design and a career dedicated to innovation and technology, I returned to academia to pursue a formal specialization in this field. Simultaneously, I wanted to provide my family (my wife and our two children, aged 19 and 11) with the experience of living abroad, mirroring my own experience when my parents moved us from Brazil to upstate New York when I was a high school student.

I looked for a master's program that aligned with my expectations and I came across academyEX, which offers a research-based master's degree focused on emerging technologies and solving real-world problems, with a different approach from traditional master's programs.

Rather than beginning with an abstract research question, this research emerged through a guided exploration of disruptive technologies and their societal impacts. This process led to the identification of a real-world problem and its formulation into an applied research question.

Two months into our stay in New Zealand, an incident with my son reminded me of the difficulties I once faced as an international student and solidified the direction of this project.

Upon arriving in New Zealand, our priority was enrolling our younger son, who speaks Portuguese but has very little command of English, in primary school. The process was smooth, and we were warmly welcomed by the staff, particularly the front desk administrator, who treated us with kindness and professionalism and gave us a comprehensive school tour.

For the first two months, our son seemed to adjust well, and we felt optimistic. However, just before the term break, an unexpected incident changed everything. My wife, who speaks limited English, received a phone call from the

same administrator who had initially welcomed us. This time, the tone was abrupt and angry, demanding our son be picked up immediately.

She was told that our son had chased a classmate with the intention of attacking him. A teacher intervened, holding him back, and in his struggle to break free, his actions were interpreted as disrespectful. This behaviour was completely out of character for him, who has always been kind and respectful.

At home, we sat down to understand what had happened. He explained that during a basketball game at recess, the ball rolled out of bounds. When he bent to retrieve it, a classmate kicked him from behind, likely as a joke. Startled and hurt, he ran after the classmate to retaliate. Crucially, because he could not communicate clearly in English, he had no way to explain his side of the story or the context of the provocation.

This incident marked a turning point for our family. The welcoming atmosphere vanished, and subsequent school visits were tinged with tension and discomfort. The event highlighted to me the challenges that non-English speaking children face in navigating cultural and linguistic barriers, particularly during moments of conflict or misunderstanding. It underscored the critical need for and **cultural sensitivity** and effective **communication tools** in schools.

This experience has given me a unique perspective, a deep sense of empathy, and a commitment to addressing these barriers to education. My research is rooted in the belief that **every child deserves the opportunity to feel understood, supported, and able to succeed**, regardless of their language, background, or cultural identity.

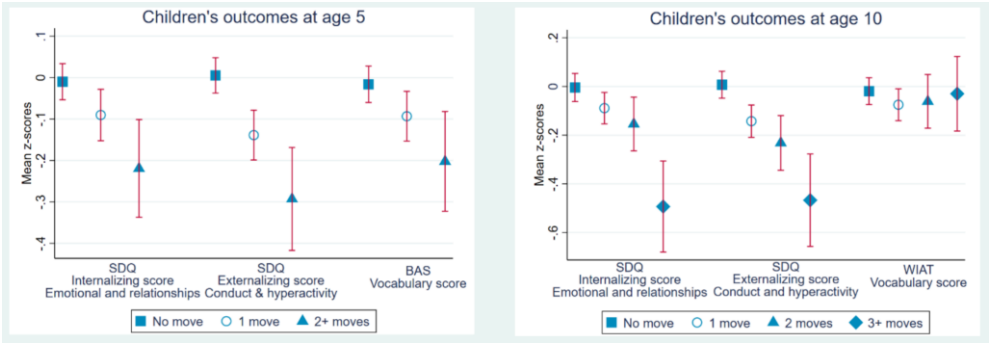
FROM A PERSONAL INCIDENT TO A RECOGNISED PATTERN

Many children who relocate internationally face more than a simple adjustment period. They often experience emotional stress, loneliness, cultural disconnection, and academic challenges. Psychologists and researchers commonly refer to this set of difficulties as **Expat Child Syndrome (ECS)** (Allianz Care, 2019).

While the concept of Expat Child Syndrome (ECS) is **not a formally recognised medical or psychological condition**, it is a descriptive label used to describe the emotional stress and adjustment difficulties experienced by children who move abroad.

Importantly, research indicates that **the simple fact of moving home during childhood can negatively affect socio-emotional development**. A 2021 study by the ESRC Centre for Population Change, *Moving home during childhood: is it harmful?* (Fiori, 2021), using data from the '*Growing Up in Scotland*' study, which follows a cohort of primary school children aged 5 to 10, found that children who move home domestically tend to have worse socio-emotional, (i.e. well-being and vocabulary abilities) than those who remain in the same residence, particularly when moves occur more than once (figure 1).

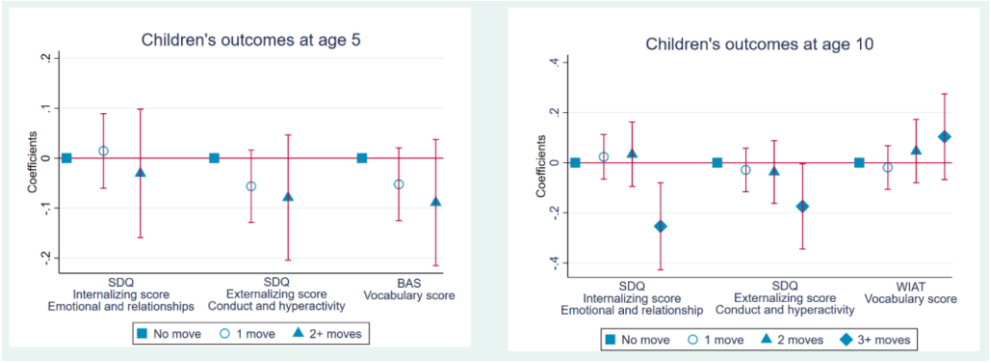
Figure 1: Children's socio-emotional well-being and cognitive outcomes at age 5 and 10, by frequency of moves. Mean z-scores and confidence intervals. (Fiori, 2021, p. 3)



While much of this disadvantage is explained by families' socio-economic backgrounds and related life events, frequent residential moves appear to have a compounding negative effect (figure 2). This pattern is attributed to the disruptive nature of moving, which creates instability in specific social contexts.

Evidence on cognitive development is more mixed: children who moved multiple times performed worse on vocabulary measures at age five.

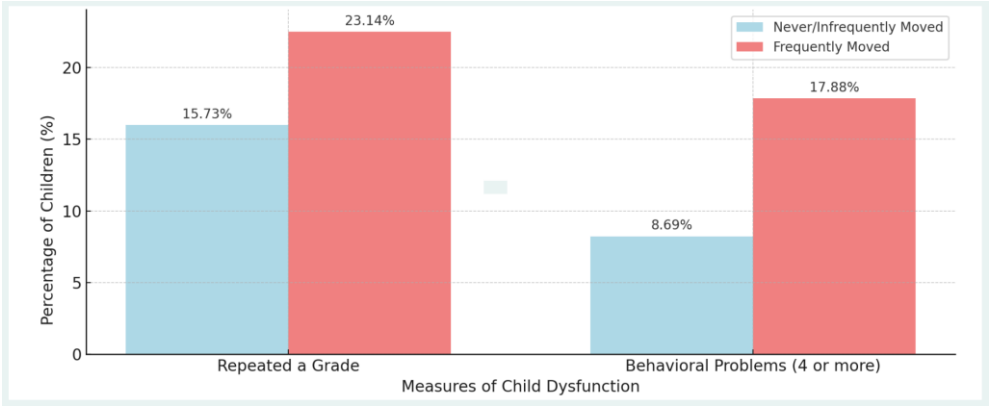
Figure 2: Fully adjusted regression estimates of moving frequency on children's outcomes at age 5 and 10. Coefficients and confidence intervals. (Fiori, 2021, p. 4)



Note: All models are adjusted for: Child characteristics at baseline; Parental education and social class; Mother's age at birth; Housing tenure and neighborhood deprivation; Changes in parental employment and family structure

Earlier evidence also connects relocation with school and behavioural outcomes. In the article *Impact of Family Relocation on Children's Growth, Development, School Function, and Behavior* (Wood et al., 1993, p. 1334), data from 9,915 children aged six to 17 years of age from families in the USA who met the research criteria were analyzed. It was found that family relocation was associated with an increased risk of children failing a grade in school and having four or more frequent behavioral problems such as Antisocial / Aggressive Behaviors, Anxiety, Depression, Hyperactivity, Social / Peer Issues, etc. (figure 3).

Figure 3: Impact of family relocation on child academic and behavioral outcomes (adapted from Wood et al., 1993, p. 1337).



Now imagine the additional complication when this change occurs in the context of relocation to a new country, where the spoken language is different from the child's original language. In addition to all the hassle of moving to a new home and an unfamiliar culture, difficulties in communication can significantly intensify a child's sense of isolation, emotional stress and academic challenges.

Language barriers not only complicate cultural adjustment but also increase the risk of social isolation and learning difficulties. For this reason, addressing ECS is essential to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment in Aotearoa New Zealand.

However, identifying ECS presents significant challenges for educators and parents. "Educators' lack of knowledge of the cultural and immigration overlays on behaviors presents a quandary, making it difficult to determine whether an emotional or behavioral disorder exists, or whether the behavior is acceptable to the newcomer's culture and therefore reflects a cultural marker" (McIntyre et al., 2011, p.4). Some behaviors associated with ECS, such as temporary withdrawal or mood changes, can be easily mistaken for normal adjustment processes. Furthermore, parents are often grappling with their own adjustment issues, such as language barriers and professional displacement. Drawing from my own experience, I recognize how these parental stressors can make it

incredibly difficult to identify, let alone address, the subtle signs of distress in one's own children.

For these reasons, it is essential to review evidence-based research that highlights the socio-emotional, academic, and cultural challenges faced by expatriate children, as well as the potential of emerging technologies to address these challenges. I propose in this research that technology can facilitate communication, provide emotional support, and enhance cultural integration.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED IN THE LITERATURE

A number of studies indicate that expat children frequently experience feelings of loss, anxiety, and loneliness due to leaving behind friends, extended family, and familiar environments.

To better frame these experiences, it is helpful to introduce the concept of **Third Culture Kids (TCKs)**. In the 1950s, based on the work of American sociologists and anthropologists Dr. Ruth Hill Useem and Dr. John Useem, the term emerged during their research in India, where they studied American expatriates (including diplomats, missionaries, and business professionals) living and working abroad.

The term **"third culture"** does not simply describe a "mix" of two cultures. Instead, it refers to a distinct lifestyle and shared community - a third culture - created by expatriates living between two worlds:

- **First Culture:** the parents' origin or passport culture
- **Second Culture:** the host country culture
- **Third Culture:** the expatriate community and lifestyle formed between the first two

Building on this foundation, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds* (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) describes TCKs as individuals who spend a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents' culture, often building

relationships across cultures without a full sense of ownership in any single one (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

This framework is also useful for understanding **ATCKs (Adult Third Culture Kids)**, who reflect on how international childhood experiences shape identity, belonging, and emotional well-being later in life. For example, Gilbert highlights how international childhood experiences are often associated with retrospective themes of loss and anxiety (Gilbert, 2008).

Adjusting to a new school and cultural setting can be overwhelming, often causing stress and emotional pain. McLachlan, studying 45 globally mobile families at an international school in England, found that adolescents (ages 13–14) experienced stress and emotional pain during relocation to a new school (McLachlan, 2007).

Children may also struggle with forming new friendships, as fear of future separations discourages deep connections. Participants in Lijadi & van Schalkwyk's study appeared anxious to commit and build close friendships with peers due to fear of later separation (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014). Similarly, Dixon & Hayden (2008) found that children reported coping strategies around leaving friends, including forming less meaningful friendships in response to multiple transitions (Dixon & Hayden, 2008).

While the **TCK/ATCK** framework helps explain identity formation and long-term patterns of belonging among globally mobile children, it does not fully capture what many families and educators observe in the **short-term adjustment period**—especially in the first months after arrival.

For this reason, this thesis is based on the concept commonly referred to as "**Expat Child Syndrome (ECS)**: a cluster of emotional, social, cultural, and academic difficulties that can emerge when children relocate internationally" (Sesay, 2025). In this research, **TCK** shows the broader developmental and cultural implications (life between cultures), while **ECS** focuses on the immediate, practical reality of adaptation stress (loneliness, anxiety, disconnection, behavioural shifts, and learning disruption) often intensified when communication is limited by language barriers.

In other words, incidents like my son's are not isolated events—they can develop into broader adaptation difficulties in which issues of identity, belonging, and stress collide under cultural and linguistic pressure, leading to ongoing issues around identity formation and long-term sense of belonging.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

In Aotearoa New Zealand, study visas for children of foreign workers have nearly doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels. According to data from Education Counts, **9,546 international students** were enrolled in New Zealand schools for years 1 to Year 15 in **2025**. Of these, approximately **2,800** were in full primary school for years 1 to 8 (Education Counts, 2025).

Furthermore, data from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment indicates that between **January and November 2025**, **19,041 student visas** were issued for students in Years 1 to 15. Of these, **12,618 (approximately 66,27%)** were issued to students from countries where English is not an official language (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2025). Applying this percentage to current enrolment figures suggests there are approximately **1,855 non-English speaking children aged 5 to 12** currently studying in New Zealand who may face significant language barriers.

The discrepancy between the number of student visas issued and the number of enrolled international students reflects the difference between visa issuance as a flow measure and school enrolment as a point-in-time measure. Not all visa holders arrive, enrol immediately, or remain enrolled within the reporting period.

The Technological Gap

While the digital age offers unprecedented tools for connection and learning, emerging technologies remain largely underutilised in the care and support of expatriate children. Findings from this study indicate that digital support for non-English-speaking students is predominantly limited to functional translation tools, such as Google Translate.

This limitation has tangible consequences for school–home engagement. Data from this research highlight that a key barrier faced by schools is ensuring that parents can access, understand, and remain up to date with school communications. When communication channels are static or linguistically inaccessible, families may miss critical information, deepening the disconnect between home and school.

AI tools could improve communication between teachers and parents who speak different languages. Messaging platforms with built-in translation, such as TalkingPoints, allow schools to send updates and feedback in parents' home languages, helping families stay involved in their child's education. This multilingual support helps build stronger school-home relationships and ensures that language barriers do not prevent students from getting the help they need.

Educational Benefits of Kaupapa Māori Pedagogies

Kaupapa Māori can be understood as a Māori-determined, community-rooted approach that advances Māori aspirations from a foundation where Māori thinking, values, knowledge, language, cultural protocols, and world views guide what is done and why. It is explicitly oriented toward positive outcomes for the collective—whānau, hapū, and iwi—and treats Māori language and cultural values (tikanga Māori) as integral to practice. Importantly, Kaupapa Māori is not just a set of ideas. It is an action-based commitment to strengthening Māori wellbeing, identity, and self-determination (rangatiratanga), including the ongoing need to uphold Māori rights in Aotearoa (Mane, 2009).

For decades, the New Zealand education system has grappled with a persistent achievement gap between Māori and non-Māori students. Historically, the underachievement of Māori students in traditional English-language schools was often explained by the belief that students failed due to their socioeconomic background or lack of parental support (Trinick, 2015).

Research led by Professor Russell Bishop and Dr. Mere Berryman challenged this view. Their groundbreaking project, **Te Kotahitanga** (2001–2013), revealed that Māori students fundamentally wanted to be respected, to have their

identity valued, and to have positive relationships with their teachers (Bishop et al., 2007).

When teachers adopted 'proactive thinking', believing they had the power to change student outcomes through their own actions, engagement increased exponentially.

Although the Te Kotahitanga project was initially conceived to support the success of the Māori, extensive research has demonstrated that these **relationship-based pedagogies create a superior learning environment for all students, regardless of their ethnicity** (Bishop et al., 2007) with the implication that concepts developed in Te Kotahitanga could also be of benefit for expatriate students and so mitigate ECS .

Why It Works for Everyone.

The Kaupapa Māori approach in mainstream schools is often described as a "Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of Relations." It relies on several key concepts that, while rooted in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world), are universally beneficial humanizing practices. The Te Kotahitanga concepts relevant to expatriate children include:

- **Rangatiratanga** (Relative autonomy / self-determination): **Students learn best when they have real agency**. This is about power-sharing (e.g., learners participating in decisions about learning directions) and relationships that minimise domination and support "self-determination" in relation to others.
- **Taonga tuku iho** (Cultural aspirations / "treasures from the ancestors"): **The lived identities of the students are legitimized**. Stereotypes are avoided, and respect for the mana and tapu (their dignity/potential) of each child is shown in the way we relate to them.
- **Ako** (Reciprocal Learning): **Teaching and learning is a two-way street**. The teacher does not hold all the knowledge; they can also learn from the student.

- **Whānau** (Extended family / a learning community): **A class can operate like a family**, not kinship, but a collective bound by relationships, mutual responsibility, and care. Warm interpersonal interactions, group solidarity, shared responsibility, and support create a safer environment where learners aren't shamed or singled out as they're still developing.
- **Kaupapa** (Collective vision / shared purpose): **Humanising practice means learning happens towards something shared**. A clear, collective philosophy linked to learners' identities and aspirations.

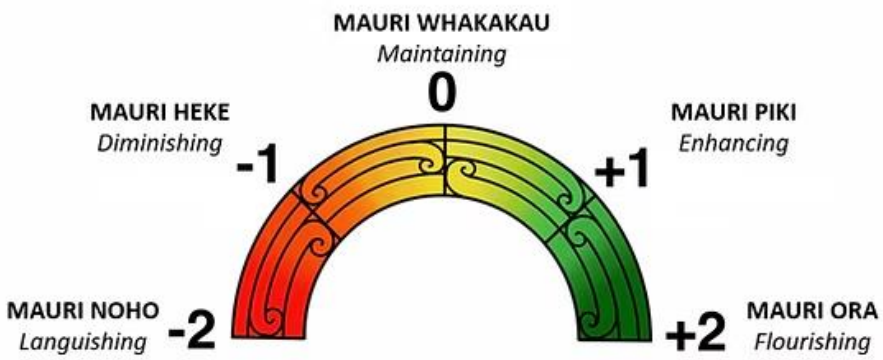
These concepts described in the Te Kotahitanga project manifest as "universally beneficial" practices, where power is shared, where culture matters, where learning is interactive, where connection is fundamental, and where a common vision exists (Bishop et al., 2007).

Drawing on these indigenous ideas offers a powerful lens for understanding the experiences of expatriate children in New Zealand schools. Much like the historical experience of tamariki Māori in mainstream education, non-English speaking immigrant children navigate a complex 'dual struggle': the effort to maintain their heritage culture while simultaneously adapting to a new societal and linguistic context. With an approach like Te Kotahitanga, expatriate children may not be viewed through a deficit model, but are welcomed into an environment where their cultural stories are honored as a foundation for their academic and social success.

Throughout this study, kaupapa Māori values provided more than a theoretical framework. They shaped how the research was carried out and how decisions were made. They guided the way I approached interviews and conversations with educators and community members. Participants were approached as partners in knowledge creation rather than subjects of study, creating a space of trust where vulnerable experiences could be shared. This commitment extended to the practical application of the research. The development of the prototypes was driven by a desire to uphold the rangatiratanga of these families, providing them with tools that foster agency and connection. By grounding the inquiry in these humanizing practices, the research aims to produce outcomes that are not only academic but genuinely serve the collective wellbeing of the expatriate community in Aotearoa.

This methodological approach was not innate, but was deeply cultivated during my time at academyEX, where the Te Ao Māori strategy is integrated into daily learning. I was fortunate to participate in weekly training sessions that explored culture, language, and frameworks. A pivotal tool in this journey was the 'Mauri-o-meter'(figure 4). While fundamentally a model used to gauge the state of one's mauri (vital essence or energy), in our practice it served as a compass, helping us reflect on our current state of being, visualize where we needed to be, and determine the actions required to shift towards Mauri Ora (flourishing). This practice of constant reflection became central to my research process. Furthermore, the guidance of Huw Jones (Kaihautū Moana Māori) and the principles enshrined in the academyEX Tikanga (Code of Conduct) provided a living example of how to embed these values into professional practice, ensuring that culture was not just a subject I studied, but a lived protocol.

Figure 4: Mauri-o-meter'



RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SUB-QUESTIONS

Synthesizing the personal necessity of addressing language barriers with the documented risks of Expatriate Child Syndrome, this research sought not only to understand the challenges faced by non-English speaking children but to actively develop a technological intervention that upholds their culture and facilitates their integration. Accordingly, the investigation was guided by the following primary research question and supporting sub-questions:

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

What innovative approaches, including the use of disruptive technologies, can be implemented to support the adaptation process for non-English speaking expatriate children to primary school in NZ?

This question is central to the research because it focuses on finding innovative solutions to a pressing problem. My initial investigation indicated that emerging technologies remain largely underutilized in supporting expatriate children, particularly in the New Zealand context. By exploring these technologies, this research aimed to develop scalable, impactful solutions that enhance their educational experiences. The following sub-questions were crucial to answer this primary research question.

SUB-QUESTIONS

1. What are the primary challenges faced by non-English speaking expatriate children (aged 5-12) when adapting to the New Zealand educational system?

This question was inspired by my son's experience and the stories of other expatriate families I encountered. Understanding the specific challenges faced by expatriate children from different countries, cultures, and belief systems was the foundation of this research. Without a clear picture of these challenges, it would have been impossible to develop effective solutions.

2. What role do existing support systems, such as school programs, family networks, and community services, play in facilitating the adaptation of expatriate children in New Zealand?

During my son's transition, I realized that while some support systems were in place (e.g., ESOL classes - English for Speakers of Other Languages), they were not always sufficient. Identifying gaps and strengths in these systems could help suggest targeted improvements, including technology integration.

3. How can the integration of kaupapa Māori values enhance the well-being of expatriate children in New Zealand, particularly regarding cultural identity and social support?

As I became more familiar with New Zealand's cultural landscape, I learned that Kaupapa Māori values, such as *manaakitanga* (care and hospitality) and *whanaungatanga* (relationships and kinship), offer a holistic framework that aligns with the needs of expatriate children, who often face challenges related to cultural identity, social isolation, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the universality of these principles resonates with other Indigenous perspectives, making them particularly relevant for expatriate families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

4. How do cultural and linguistic barriers contribute to the socio-emotional and academic difficulties experienced by expatriate children?

As discussed previously, cultural and linguistic barriers are among the most significant challenges faced by expatriate children. By understanding how these barriers contribute to socio-emotional and academic difficulties, the research sought to propose targeted solutions, such as specific language support programs or culturally sensitive teaching practices.

5. What ethical considerations arise from using emerging disruptive technologies to support expatriate children, and how can these be addressed?

This question was crucial because it aimed to consider the ethical implications of using technology to support vulnerable populations, such as expatriate children who are also minors. By addressing these considerations, the research was able to propose guidelines for the responsible use of technology. This is particularly important in an era where technology is increasingly integrated into education.

2. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework, participants, data-collection procedures, analytic approach, and ethical safeguards used to investigate Expat Child Syndrome (ECS) among newly arrived, non-English speaking primary-aged expatriate children in Aotearoa New Zealand. To effectively address the primary research question and its associated sub-questions, ensuring that the proposed technological intervention is grounded in the lived reality of expatriate families, classroom teachers, and primary school contexts, the research was conducted in three distinct phases. Phase One consisted of an exploratory stage involving semi-structured interviews and the collection of personal testimonials. The findings from this phase informed the design of Phase Two, which focused on data collection through targeted surveys distributed to selected primary schools and classroom teachers (schools with at least 10 newly arrived expatriate students) across New Zealand. Phase Three involved the design and development of functional prototypes, directly informed by the insights and patterns identified in Phases One and Two, translating empirical findings into practical, user-centred technological solutions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This project adopted a sequential mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches aimed at identifying core themes associated with ECS and the systems needed to support expatriate children in primary school settings.

Sampling aimed to recruit participants with direct experience of supporting children navigating language transition, cultural adjustment, belonging, and wellbeing within primary school contexts. Participants were drawn from three stakeholder groups central to a child's school adaptation ecosystem:

- **Parents/caregivers** of newly arrived expatriate children enrolled in New Zealand primary schools.

- **Primary school teachers** who work with newly arrived expatriate or non-English-speaking children.

- **Primary school principals** responsible for induction processes, resourcing, and school-based support systems.

As outlined previously, the research was conducted in three distinct phases, as described below.

Phase One: Qualitative Interviews and Testimonials

The exploratory qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews and personal testimonials to support an in-depth examination of children's adjustment experiences and school-level induction and support practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents/caregivers, teachers, and a primary school principal to capture multiple institutional and familial perspectives. In addition, personal testimonials were collected exclusively from parents/caregivers through the website newkiwikids.co.nz, on an anonymous basis, providing rich, first-hand accounts of the family's broader migration and settlement experience, with particular emphasis on the child's school transition and wellbeing. In total, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 parents/caregivers, 3 teachers, and 1 primary school principal, using a combination of online and in-person formats. Online interviews were conducted via Google Meet and recorded and transcribed, while in-person interviews were not recorded. Participant responses were instead documented in written form on the interview guide during the interview.

- Parent Interviews: The interview guide for parents (see Appendix 01/02) focused on the child's background, emotional well-being, and specific challenges regarding school transitions and social isolation. During these sessions, participants were invited to voluntarily share a written testimonial online following the interview. In total, six testimonials were submitted through the New Kiwi Kids website. These narratives provided rich, qualitative evidence of the adaptation journey and served as the foundational content for the development of the "New Kiwi Kids" support hub.

- Educator Interviews: Interviews with teachers and the principal explored the school's capacity to identify and support non-English speaking students. Questions addressed classroom observations, behavioral patterns, and the availability of professional development for staff. (see Appendix 03/04/05/06)

The insights from these interviews highlighted specific gaps in institutional support, guidance materials, and professional training, which were then used to formulate the questions for the quantitative surveys in Phase Two.

Phase Two: Quantitative Surveys

Focused on quantitative data collection through structured surveys administered to primary school teachers and principals, the second phase aimed to validate the initial findings across a broader sample of New Zealand schools. Surveys were developed using Google Forms and distributed via email.

- School Principals: Requests were sent by email to 143 principals of primary schools identified through the government education data portal Education Counts, an official New Zealand Ministry of Education resource for school and education statistics. The dataset was filtered to include only schools enrolling at least 10 expatriate students (student visa holders), using data from 2025. The survey investigated school-wide demographics, the existence of formal support policies, and resources for ESOL students. (see Appendix 07)

Of the 26 responses, 11 principals requested a copy of the final research results, indicating a strong professional interest in the topic. Additionally, one school reached out to offer a more in-depth conversation, which was conducted after the initial data analysis to deepen the interpretation of the findings. (see Appendix 08/09/10/11)

- Teachers: A similar survey was distributed by email to 61 primary school teachers from schools with the same demographic profile. Contact details were obtained from the schools' websites. The survey focused on classroom dynamics, teacher preparedness, and the practical challenges of integrating non-English speaking students without specialist support. (see Appendix 12)

Of the 11 responses, 2 teachers expressed interest in receiving the final research output. (see Appendix 13/14/15)

It is acknowledged that the email-based distribution approach presents inherent limitations that may have influenced response rates. Survey invitations may have been filtered into spam or junk folders, overlooked due to high administrative workloads, or deprioritised amidst competing school responsibilities.

Phase Three: Design of Prototype

This final phase focused on the synthesis of findings from the previous stages to inform the development of tangible technological solutions. By integrating the qualitative insights regarding emotional isolation and identity loss (Phase One) with the systemic resource gaps and time constraints quantified in the surveys (Phase Two), I established a clear set of user requirements and design constraints. This evidence-based process moved the research from theoretical analysis to applied innovation, driving the architecture of the three proposed interventions: the *New Kiwi Kids* support hub, the *Culture in a Click* training platform, and the *VoiceLink* AI interpreter. These functional prototypes represent the practical translation of the study's findings and will be demonstrated during the final research presentation.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of data for this study followed a consistent, iterative process driven by the specific research objectives identified in the literature review described in the introduction of this document. An empirical approach was utilized to interpret the raw data. This involved a systematic review of the interview transcripts to identify emergent themes, such as specific behavioural changes, social isolation, or resource gaps. These findings were then mapped against the study's core inquiry areas, which included: identifying language-related challenges, assessing the effectiveness of school support systems, and exploring emotional adaptation.

Phase One: Qualitative Analysis

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews began with a comprehensive review of the notes and the transcripts generated via the Google Meet platform. The data was organized and interpreted according to the specific objectives

outlined in the interview guides, such as understanding the child's migration context, assessing their school transition experience, and exploring their emotional and social well-being. This structured approach ensured that the findings remained aligned with the study's core investigative lines, specifically addressing the research sub-questions regarding the primary challenges faced by these children and the effectiveness of existing support systems.

Additionally, some themes emerged that had not been previously considered, such as the 'invisible' struggle of fluent children or the specific impact of 'food shame', which were derived from the participants' insights and proved vital in informing the prototype design.

The parent interviews aimed to go beyond simply listing logistical "challenges" and it focused on making sense of how the child and parent perceive their new reality in the new country. By examining responses to emotional questions such as "How has your child felt... (sadness, stress, frustration, or withdrawal)?" and "Does your child talk about feeling included or excluded?", the analysis mapped the emotional trajectory of the families. This process allowed for the inclusion of emotional aspects involved in the adaptation process.

For teachers and the principal, the analysis focused on identifying systemic gaps and observable behavioral patterns. The notes were reviewed to gain an overview of the data, noting recurring concepts such as "emotional adaptation" and "language barriers". These open-ended interview responses regarding "challenges... academically and socially" were used to formulate the multiple-choice options in the Teacher Survey. For example, specific teacher observations informed the survey questions around themes of anxiety management, communication with peers, and understanding classroom instructions.

The analysis examined the frequency and presence of themes within the interview data to identify their relevance and justify their inclusion in the quantitative tools. For instance, the recurring mention of "anxiety" or "silence" in teacher interviews justified the inclusion of "Anxiety or nervousness" and "Quietness / reluctance to speak" as specific checkboxes in the final survey.

Similarly, insights on systemic issues identified during the principal interview informed the checklist of integration barriers in the Principal Survey, such as the specific option for "Lack of cultural resources".

Phase Two: Quantitative Analysis

The survey data collected via Google Forms was analysed using descriptive statistics to determine the prevalence of the themes identified in the qualitative phase. Frequency counts were utilized to analyse demographic variables, such as the density of expatriate students within a school, and to quantify the prevalence of specific support types, such as the use of "Language toolkits" or "Cultural welcomes". This stage provided a broader validation of the initial findings, moving from individual testimonies to a generalized understanding of the institutional support landscape in New Zealand primary schools.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND DATA MANAGEMENT

This research was conducted in strict adherence to the ethical standards required for working with human participants, operating under the formal approval of the academyEX Ethics Panel (Ref: MTF.8888.249; REE Working Group approved 14-04-25). The protection of participants' rights and well-being was paramount throughout both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study. It is important to note that **although the study refers to the experiences of children, no minors were directly involved in the research**. This decision was made to prioritize the emotional safety of a vulnerable population already navigating significant transition stress. Consequently, data collection relied exclusively on the perceptions and observations of the parents and educators responsible for them. Participation was entirely voluntary, with clear protocols in place ensuring that all respondents, whether parents, teachers, or school leaders, retained the agency to decline to answer specific questions or to exit the process at any time. Informed consent was obtained prior to all interviews, while survey participants were provided with comprehensive information detailing the study's purpose and privacy measures before engaging with the questionnaire.

Data management procedures were designed to ensure complete confidentiality of interview participants and anonymity of testimonial and survey participants. All data collected through surveys and interviews were treated as confidential and analyzed in aggregate, ensuring that no individual participant, child, or school could be identified in any reporting. To further safeguard participant identity, distinct separation protocols were applied to personal data. Specifically, email addresses provided by participants wishing to receive a summary of the findings were stored separately from their survey responses, preventing any linkage between contact details and the research data.

Beyond procedural compliance, the ethical framework of this study was deeply informed by Kaupapa Māori values, which guided my engagement with participants and the handling of sensitive narratives. The principle of Whanaungatanga (building relationships) was central to the interviews in the qualitative phase, where establishing rapport was viewed as essential for researching sensitive topics such as social isolation. Significant care was taken to build trust with parents and caregivers before formal interviews began. To create a stronger connection, I openly shared my own personal story and the challenges my son faced. This exchange transformed the data collection process into a shared dialogue rather than a transactional extraction of information.

The principle of Manaakitanga (care and respect) governed the ethical handling of all contributions, ensuring that the voices of parents, particularly those sharing vulnerable testimonials, were treated with dignity. This ethic of care extended to the participating schools and educators. Their contributions were respected not only through anonymity but also through the reciprocal offer to share final research findings, acknowledging their role as partners in knowledge creation.

Finally, the study embodied Kotahitanga (unity and collaboration) by recognizing that supporting an expatriate child requires a collective effort. This value underpinned the methodological decision to triangulate data from parents, teachers, and principals, ensuring that the final analysis presented a complete, unified picture of the support ecosystem rather than isolated perspectives.

USE OF GENERATIVE AI TOOLS

This research made selective use of generative AI and related digital tools to support, but not replace, my own analytical and creative work. In line with academyEX expectations around transparency, this section outlines which tools were used, how they contributed at different stages of the research and design process, and how I validated and retained ownership of all outputs.

The AI tools were used at different points in the writing process, primarily as language and organisational supports. The conceptualisation of the project, design of the methodology, analysis of data, and interpretation of findings were undertaken by me.

I used **ChatGPT** to help interpret and align my thesis structure with the academyEX report guide. This involved asking for suggested chapter ordering, typical headings, and indicative content for each section. I then adapted these suggestions by adding, removing, and re-ordering sections to match my research design, institutional requirements, and personal judgement.

After I had completed this report, I provided it to **ChatGPT** and asked it to draft a concise Abstract and Executive Summary, then I edited and reworded them so that they reflected my intentions and aligned with assessment criteria.

A substantial portion of this report, particularly early conceptual sections, reflections, and some methodological descriptions, was written in Portuguese. I then used **Google Gemini** to rewrite this material in English. My prompts explicitly requested a natural English rewriting of my Portuguese text, not a literal word-for-word translation. The AI outputs were therefore treated as stylistic translations of content I had already written.

After receiving each English version, I carefully reviewed it, correcting terminology and simplifying vocabulary so that it sounded authentic to my voice. In many cases, I replaced unfamiliar words or expressions suggested by the model with terms I normally use, even when the AI choice was technically correct.

During the literature review, I sometimes used **ChatGPT** to help me locate specific sections or themes within long articles (for example, methods, limitations, or concepts) and to generate short summaries to speed up my initial familiarization with the material. These AI-generated descriptions were used only as scaffolding. All literature that informed the thesis was read directly by me.

I used **Perplexity** as a starting point to identify potentially relevant academic literature and reports available online. When the tool suggested a source, I followed the original links and evaluated each item myself for relevance, credibility, and methodological quality.

The technological prototypes developed in this study (New Kiwi Kids Hub, Culture in a Click, and VoiceLink) also involved the use of generative tools, particularly for coding and voice synthesis. My role remained that of the responsible designer, decision-maker, and evaluator.

For the VoiceLink prototype, I used **Manus** as a coding assistant tool to support the implementation of application logic and API integrations between the conversational AI service and a third-party text-to-speech provider. The assistant produced initial code snippets for tasks such as handling requests and responses, managing sessions, and calling the relevant APIs.

I always tested this code to ensure that it met my design requirements, respected privacy constraints, and functioned reliably in the prototype context. Design choices about interaction flow, privacy safeguards, and user experience were made by me. The coding assistant accelerated implementation but did not determine these design decisions.

For the Culture in a Click and VoiceLink prototypes, I explored synthetic voice tools to determine how the final applications sound. During the presentation of this thesis, the prototype VoiceLink will use a system-provided voices from **ChatGPT** as demonstration only. In the intended production version, I will integrate **ElevenLabs** as the primary text-to-speech provider, with conversational logic driven through the AI API of **OpenAI**. In all cases, voice synthesis was used only to give a more realistic impression of user interaction. It did not generate any content or analysis.

Across all stages, I applied the following principles to maintain academic integrity:

- The core intellectual work of this thesis was carried out by me. This included problem framing, research questions, design of instruments, collection and analysis of data, interpretation of findings, and formulation of recommendations.

- Generative tools were used as assistants for language, structure, search, code implementation, and voice rendering, not as substitutes for critical thinking or ethical responsibility.

- Whenever AI contributed text, I reviewed, edited, and, where necessary, rewrote the material to ensure accuracy, alignment with my values and context, and consistency with the rest of the thesis.

- All empirical claims and theoretical arguments in this report were checked against original sources or my own data.

This reflection is provided to ensure transparency about where and how generative AI tools intersected with my research practice. It acknowledges the practical benefits these tools offered while affirming my responsibility for the integrity, originality, and trustworthiness of the work presented.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Several methodological limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. A primary constraint lies in the scale of the quantitative data collection; while the original research design anticipated a sample size exceeding 100 responses to ensure broader statistical robustness, practical recruitment challenges resulted in a smaller final cohort.

Efforts to expand the reach through digital professional networks were hindered, notably when requests submitted to nine administrators of Facebook groups for primary school teachers, such as ‘Primary teachers sharing

resources' (56.7K members) and 'NZ Primary School Leaders' (2.6K members), to share the survey link were unsuccessful, restricting distribution to direct email channels. (see Appendix 16)

Furthermore, the sampling strategy employed for the surveys introduced specific boundaries to the data. By deliberately focusing on schools with at least ten expatriate students to ensure data relevance, the study may have underrepresented smaller schools where newly arrived children are present in lower numbers. This exclusion suggests that the experiences of isolated expatriate learners, who may face different integration challenges than those in high-density schools, may not be fully captured.

A significant limitation concerns the validation of the technological outputs. Due to the strict time constraints of this master's programme, the developed prototypes (*VoiceLink*, *New Kiwi Kids*, and *Culture in a Click*) have not yet undergone user testing in a live school environment.

Finally, the voluntary nature of the study introduces the potential for self-selection bias, where participants with particularly strong positive or negative experiences regarding integration may be overrepresented compared to those with neutral experiences.

3. FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges faced by non-English speaking primary school-aged children in New Zealand, moving beyond the obvious linguistic barriers to understand the deeper emotional and social impact of migration, framed here as Expat Child Syndrome (ECS). This investigation provides the evidence base necessary to answer the study's primary research question:

"What innovative approaches, including the use of disruptive technologies, can be implemented to support the adaptation process for non-English speaking expatriate children to primary school in NZ?"

All the participants in this research (parents, teachers, and school principals) share a common goal: the successful integration and well-being of the child. However, the data reveals that their experiences of this process differ significantly based on their role within the educational system.

Although the focus of the research was on children newly arrived in New Zealand who "don't speak English," two parents of expat children who speak little or are already fluent also participated in the research. This inclusion was deliberate and crucial. By analysing the experiences of fluent English speaking children, I was able to isolate the "migration factor" from the "language factor," establishing that emotional distress and identity crises occur even when communication barriers are removed.

The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from a triangulation of data collected during the first two phases of research. This includes qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews, alongside quantitative data from surveys completed by primary school principals and teachers across New Zealand.

PHASE ONE: INSIGHTS INTO ECS

In this section, I examine the lived experiences of families resettled in a new country and insights from the educators supporting the newly arrived students. Much like the exploratory nature of the interviews, these conversations did not aim to prove a scientific constant but rather to analyze the contexts of these life stories in relation to the lived reality of ECS.

Through the narratives of parents, teachers, and a principal, I gained an understanding of how identities are deconstructed and reconstructed in a new land. One parent described how their daughter, a vibrant 'class leader' in her home country, became withdrawn and silent after relocating to New Zealand, reducing her classroom participation and contributing to her isolation. The interviews reveal that for the child, the school is not merely an academic institution, but the primary stage where their validity as a person is tested daily.

A critical finding from the parental interviews was the distinction between visible and invisible struggles. For children with no English, the struggle is immediate and external, often manifesting as silence or as noted by some parents and teachers, aggressive frustration due to an inability to communicate. However, the interviews with parents of fluent children revealed a more insidious challenge. One parent noted that because his daughter spoke English, her cultural transition was treated as complete by the school. Her specific needs were invisible, and she was forced to assimilate rather than integrate, leading to a "loss of identity" and a desperate attempt to fit into groups where she felt she belonged "nowhere." This mirrors the Third Culture Kid dilemma, where the child exists in a cultural limbo, leading to long-term issues with self-worth and belonging.

The testimonials collected highlighted the profound emotional toll of being the "othered." Parents shared heart-breaking accounts of children being bullied or self-excluding due to cultural differences, such as the smell of their food. One mother reported that her daughter refused to take traditional food, which she loved, to school. A rejection of her own culture in order to survive socially.

This aligns with the teachers' observations that these students often become "very quiet" or withdraw entirely. The principal interviewed noted that "behaviour is communication", when a child lashes out or shuts down, they are communicating the distress of ECS that they cannot yet verbalize.

From the educators' perspective, the interviews exposed a reliance on organic social structures that are often fragile. Teachers frequently mentioned using a "buddy system" to pair new arrivals with empathetic peers. However, the interviews revealed that this strategy is inconsistent, leading to the new child becoming overly dependent on a single peer, hindering broader social integration.

Perhaps the most significant theme to emerge from the interviews was the gap between intent and capacity. A teacher expressed a deep desire to practice Manaakitanga (hospitality/kindness), but admitted to being hamstrung by a lack of time and resources. She described the guilt of knowing a child was "slipping through the cracks" because the curriculum demands left no room for the one-on-one emotional support required.

These interviews were instrumental in shaping the second phase of the research. Recurring themes such as "loss of identity", "Less participation", "social isolation", "lack of time and resources", "behaviour problems", moved the research from anecdotal evidence to specific hypotheses. Consequently, the survey questionnaires were designed specifically to quantify these qualitative feelings to see if these individual narratives reflected a reality.

PHASE TWO: ECS IN AOTEAROA

The quantitative phase of the research aimed to explore how the interview findings were reflected across a wider range of New Zealand schools. Although the number of respondents was limited, the data provides useful insights into the perceived school environment for expatriate children, informed by responses from 26 principals and 11 teachers.

The survey captured a diverse spread of schools, primarily serving the major urban centres. The respondents were concentrated in Auckland (38.5%), Canterbury (34.6%), and Wellington (15.4%), reflecting the geographic distribution of migration in New Zealand, where the concentration of international primary school students is heavily skewed towards Auckland (53.3%), followed by Christchurch (12.9%), Tauranga (8.1%), Wellington (7.3%), and Hamilton (5.1%). The remainder of the country accounts for only 13.3%.

PRINCIPALS' SURVEY

Schools generally demonstrate strong intent regarding cultural welcome. 88% of principals indicated they offer a "School tour" for new families , and 44% provide a specific "Cultural welcome" such as *pōwhiri* (formal welcomes) or *mihi whakatau* (welcome speeches) with *waiata* (songs). However, the depth of induction varies. Open-ended responses highlighted robust processes in some schools, such as:

- *'Enrolment meeting with the Principal... we discuss how our school day runs... and take time to find out about the family.'*
- *'Meeting with Cultural Lead Teacher... and connecting with their whānau.'*

While 92.3% of schools provide ESOL programmes and 73.1% offer wellbeing support, principals identified significant barriers to effective integration.

- Time (64%): This was the single most cited barrier. Principals noted that staff simply lack the "time to prepare them for assessments".
- Language (48%): Language remains a persistent hurdle.
- Behavioural Complexity: One principal noted that *'behavioural issues make it even more challenging... especially when there is aggression involved,'* highlighting the link between communication frustration and behaviour.

The Confidence Discrepancy - Principals generally expressed moderate confidence in their staff's ability to support these children. 42.3% rated their staff's confidence at a 4 out of 5, and 38.5% at a 3 out of 5. However, as the teacher survey reveals, this perception may be optimistic.

TEACHERS' SURVEY

The teachers' survey provided a view from the classroom "front lines," revealing a more strained reality than the administrative view.

Most teachers reported having only one non-English speaking student in their classroom (54.5%), while another 36.4% managed groups of 2 to 3 students. Crucially, 54.5% of teachers reported having "no information" about the number or nationality of these students before the school year began, indicating a lack of preparatory lead time.

A critical finding is the almost total lack of specific preparation. 90.9% of teachers reported receiving "No specific training" related to supporting non-English speaking expatriate students. This suggests that while schools have ESOL programs, the mainstream classroom teacher is largely unsupported.

Teachers identified the following as the most significant barriers they face:

- Lack of Time (90.9%): Teachers consistently cited this as the top barrier. One teacher explicitly stated, "The biggest challenge... is being able to find the time to help them".
- Communication Barriers (81.8%): Difficulty communicating with the child and family.
- Lack of Resources (45.5%): Nearly half of teachers feel they lack the physical or digital tools needed.

Observed Behaviours: Teachers confirmed the "invisible" nature of ECS symptoms. In the first weeks, they observed:

- Quietness / Reluctance to speak (36.4%).
- Sadness or Withdrawal (27.3%).
- Dependence: A significant 45.5% noted an "Increased dependence on one 'buddy' or small group". This validates the interview findings that while buddy systems are common, they can create a fragile dependency rather than broad social integration.

Academically and socially, the friction is palpable. 90.9% of teachers identified "Participating in class discussions" as a main challenge, and 36.4% flagged difficulties in "Communicating with peers / making friends".

In contrast to the principals' view, teacher confidence is low. 30% rated their confidence at a 2/5, and another 30% at 3/5. Only one teacher felt "Very confident" (5/5). This gap between principal perception and teacher reality highlights a critical area for intervention.

OVERCOMING ECS

The findings in this chapter reveal that the adaptation process for newly arrived expatriate children in primary schools is shaped by more than just English proficiency. While language is a central barrier, cited by 81.8% of teachers as a primary hurdle, the data triangulation confirms that the "invisible" drivers of ECS are equally critical in the first weeks and months after arrival.

Cultural Belonging & Identity Safety: The interviews exposed how identity is "deconstructed" upon arrival. The parent testimonials of children refusing traditional food or fluent speakers "masking" their heritage aligns with the finding that schools often lack the resources to validate cultural identity beyond a surface-level welcome.

Peer Relationships & Emotional Adjustment: The reliance on fragile "buddy systems"—noted as a risk in the interviews—was quantitatively validated by the 45.5% of teachers who observed an unhealthy "increased dependence" on a single peer. This social fragility directly correlates with the 27.3% of students observed withdrawing into sadness, confirming that emotional regulation is a precursor to social integration.

The Resource Gap: Ultimately, the disconnect between principal confidence and teacher reality defines the systemic challenge. With 90.9% of teachers identifying "Lack of Time" as their single biggest barrier, it is clear that current support models are unsustainable. The guilt expressed by teachers in the interviews about students "slipping through the cracks" is not a personal failure

but a systemic one, driven by a lack of "low-friction" tools that fit into an already overcrowded curriculum.

Taken together, these findings provide the foundation for addressing the research questions, which are examined in turn below.

SUB-QUESTIONS

What are the primary challenges faced by non-English speaking expatriate children (aged 5-12) when adapting to the New Zealand educational system?

The findings indicate that non-English-speaking expatriate children face significant challenges during their adaptation to primary school in New Zealand. Limited English proficiency often restricts their ability to participate confidently in classroom discussions and learning activities, communicate effectively with peers, and form meaningful friendships. In addition to academic barriers, these children frequently experience emotional strain, including feelings of loss, stress, and withdrawal. Such challenges may manifest as quietness, reduced classroom participation, reliance on a buddy system, or visible sadness, behaviours that are often misinterpreted as personality traits rather than indicators of adjustment-related stress.

Importantly, the findings also confirm that the challenges faced by expatriate children are not solely linguistic. While language frequently functions as an initial barrier to entry, many of the most significant difficulties are socio-emotional in nature, including social isolation, loss of identity, and anxiety associated with navigating a new cultural landscape. As evidenced by the interviews, these challenges persist even when children are proficient in English, highlighting that language support alone is insufficient to fully address the adaptation needs of expatriate children.

What role do existing support systems, such as school programs, family networks, and community services, play in facilitating the adaptation of expatriate children in New Zealand?

The Principals Survey showed that most schools provide induction and orientation practices (particularly school tours and buddy systems), alongside

strong baseline language support through ESOL and regular access to wellbeing supports. However, the "Confidence Gap" combined with the reported lack of training (90%), suggests that existing systems are fragile rather than resilient.

Teachers' responses further indicate that limited time and communication barriers constrain what can be delivered consistently in the classroom, even when the school intends to be welcoming and inclusive. As a result, support often depends on the individual goodwill of teachers who are already time-poor, rather than on robust, scalable, and systematised approaches.

How can the integration of kaupapa Māori values enhance the well-being of expatriate children in New Zealand, particularly regarding cultural identity and social support?

The integration of Kaupapa Māori values emerges as a critical factor in enhancing wellbeing and mitigating the symptoms of Expat Child Syndrome. Survey data indicate that Manaakitanga (the process of welcome and care) is widely operationalised through structured induction practices, with 88% of principals conducting school tours and 44% offering formal cultural welcomes such as pōwhiri or mihi whakatau. This formal acknowledgement plays a significant role in reducing initial trauma. When schools explicitly practice Manaakitanga, they validate the child's presence, directly countering the "loss of identity" described in parent testimonials.

While 45.5% of teachers reported a heavy reliance on buddy systems (tuakana/teina), this can be understood as an attempt to create a whānau-like support system within the school environment. However, the findings also reveal a critical gap in extending this relational support beyond the school. Parent testimonials indicated significant isolation, suggesting that while schools may successfully build relationships with the child, they often lack the capacity and resources to extend Whanaungatanga to the wider family.

How do cultural and linguistic barriers contribute to the socio-emotional and academic difficulties experienced by expatriate children?

The research identifies a "silence trap" where linguistic barriers, cited by 81.8% of teachers as a major hurdle, trigger profound behavioral withdrawal rather

than just learning delays. Teachers reported that 36.4% of these students exhibit "quietness or reluctance to speak," while 27.3% show visible "sadness or withdrawal". This aligns with parent testimonials describing children who became "completely silent" or aggressive due to the inability to express themselves. This barrier effectively strips the child of their personality in the school setting, leading to the anxiety central to ECS.

Cultural barriers often manifest as "identity shame," exemplified by a testimonial revealing a child who refused to bring traditional food to school due to comments about the smell. This cultural rejection forces the child to mask their identity to survive socially, consuming the mental energy that would otherwise be available for academic learning.

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

What innovative approaches, including the use of disruptive technologies, can be implemented to support the adaptation process for non-English speaking expatriate children to primary school in NZ?

The findings dictate the nature of the solution. Since the primary barriers are Time (90% of teachers) and Training (90% of teachers), any innovative approach must be low-friction, autonomous, and resource-light. It cannot add to the teacher's workload. The solution must address the "invisible" emotional needs of the child and bridge the communication gap that leads to behaviour issues.

The triangulation of this data, the parents' cry for identity support, the teachers' plea for time and tools, and the principals' identification of systemic gaps, provides a clear design brief. We know what is missing: a way to support the child's emotional and cultural validity without requiring constant teacher intervention. The following chapter, DISCUSSION AND DESIGN JOURNEY, details how these findings were translated into tangible prototypes designed to bridge these specific gaps.

4.DISCUSSION AND DESIGN JOURNEY

For non-English speaking expatriate children in New Zealand, the school gates represent more than an educational boundary. They are a threshold of cultural and emotional negotiation. While the so-called "Expatriate Child Syndrome" (ECS) is not a clinical diagnosis, the data I collected from parents, teachers, and principals validate it as a distinct psychosocial phenomenon characterized by withdrawal, loss of identity, and behavioral changes.

In this discussion, I synthesize my findings to argue that the current educational response, heavily reliant on under-resourced teachers and generic funding for English as a Second Language (ESOL) education, is insufficient to address the emotional urgency of ECS. I explore the systemic gap I identified between the "willingness" to support and the "ability" to do so, and propose that disruptive and scalable technology offers a viable bridge across this gap.

Although my research focuses on non-English speaking children, I found it essential to also address the experiences of expatriate children who arrive already fluent in English. By stepping back from individual stories, quantitative findings, and the diverse perspectives of parents, teachers, and principals, I realized that my findings extend beyond the well-known problem of language barriers. Instead, they point to a deeper problem of belonging that may remain hidden beneath the appearance of “successful adaptation.”

The most striking finding for me is the division between visible and invisible suffering. If a child speaks little or no English, the suffering is obvious: silence, withdrawal, frustration, or aggressive behaviors when needs cannot be expressed. But when a child speaks English, the school may misinterpret this as "transition complete," and the child's cultural and identity stress becomes invisible, sometimes producing a painful form of forced assimilation and "loss of identity." My data corroborate this idea, showing that fluent expatriate children often suffer in silence, masking their cultural displacement in order to fit in.

This distinction is important because it changes what schools look for and how they respond. In my data, distress is often misinterpreted as child behavior

("quiet child") or discipline ("inappropriate behavior"), rather than communication of unmet needs. The principal's phrase, "behavior is communication," captured this perfectly for me. Children communicate distress through the only channels available to them when they lack language, confidence, or cultural security.

At the same time, I observed a pattern that I would summarize as strong intention vs. fragile capacity. Schools want children to integrate well, and principals report integration practices that seem welcoming on paper (e.g., guided school tours and cultural welcomes). But in the daily reality of the classroom, teachers describe significant limitations. In survey responses, lack of time was cited by 90% of teachers, followed by communication barriers at 81% and lack of training/resources at 45%, meaning that support often depends on individual goodwill rather than a scalable system.

This fragility is visible in what I call the "trust gap." Principals generally feel their staff are reasonably confident, but teachers self-assess much more negatively, and many report not having received specific training to support newly arrived students who don't speak English. I interpret this gap as a structural risk. If leadership presupposes a capacity that teachers don't feel they possess, support gaps can remain hidden until a crisis occurs (usually behavioral or social).

Finally, my findings have led me to question a very common "solution," used with good intentions: the **Buddy System**, a practice in which a newly arrived student is paired with an established peer to help them navigate routines, social norms, and the school environment. Teachers and schools frequently resort to it, but the findings of this study suggest that it can unintentionally create dependence on a single peer instead of a broader sense of belonging, especially in the first few weeks when the child has no other social reference point. In other words, the buddy system may temporarily reduce isolation while delaying deeper integration.

My findings point to a specific role for technology not as a replacement for human care, but as a complement to it. The "conflict resolution" failure identified in this research, where digital translators failed to convey the context

of a child's distress, highlights the limitations of static tools like Google Translate.

My primary research question asks what innovative approaches, including the use of disruptive technologies, can support adaptation for non-English speaking expatriate children in NZ. In my interpretation, the findings point to a very specific design requirement: If schools are time-poor and teachers are under-prepared, then the most helpful innovations must be fast, lightweight, culturally respectful, and usable "in the moment," not only as long-form policy or training.

I argue for the application of Context-Aware AI. An expatriate child kicked on a basketball court needs more than a literal translation of the word "kick". They need an advocate that understands the emotional weight of the event. I propose an AI "interpreter" to address the finding that peer-buddy systems are often fragile and inconsistent. By providing a reliable, non-judgmental communication channel, technology can serve as a "transitional object," reducing the anxiety of the "silent period" and allowing the child to maintain autonomy.

However, supporting the child requires supporting their entire ecosystem. My interviews with parents revealed that their anxiety often mirrors that of their children, compounded by a lack of "insider knowledge" about the New Zealand school system. To bridge this gap, I propose the "New Kiwi Kids" Support Hub. This digital platform is designed to function as a digital tūrangawaewae—a place to stand—where families can connect, share lived experiences, and access curated guides on navigating their new environment. By moving knowledge from closed silos into a shared community space, this tool transforms the individual struggle of the immigrant family into collective community resilience.

Finally, I must address the reality of the classroom teacher where almost all of them pointed out the lack of time and specific training to support these diverse learners. It is unrealistic to expect time-poor educators to study comprehensive textbooks for every new nationality in their class. Therefore, I propose a Teacher Training Platform based on a "zero-prep" micro-learning model. Inspired by the resource "New to New Zealand" recommended by a participating teacher, this

tool evolves that concept into a "culture-in-a-click" experience. It will provide bite-sized, audio-first content (such as 10-minute cultural primers listenable during a commute) that equips teachers with immediate, high-impact gestures, like a native-language greeting on Day One. This solution respects the teacher's limited bandwidth while ensuring the student feels culturally validated from the moment they arrive.

DESIGN PROCESS

The transition from research to the development of technological solutions was guided by a User-Centered Design approach. After identifying the main pain points—teachers' limited time, the isolation experienced by parents, and the lack of active voice for children—the development process was informed by my extensive professional experience in graphic design and visual communication, combined with the strategic use of emerging digital technologies. This combination allowed for the progressive conception of solutions, responsively tailored to the end-user needs identified throughout the investigation.

Crucially, this phase was not an isolated or unilateral development. Throughout all the interviews conducted with parents, teachers, and school principal, preliminary ideas for technological solutions were consistently shared with the participants. These moments functioned as deliberate spaces for listening and validation, in which feedback, criticism, and suggestions were actively solicited and incorporated, contributing to the refinement of the proposals and ensuring that the solutions remained anchored in the realities experienced by the stakeholders themselves.

Output 1: New Kiwi Kids Support Hub (newkiwikids.co.nz)

My findings revealed that expatriate parents often feel isolated and lack "insider knowledge" about the NZ school system. Testimonials indicated that while schools focus on the child, the family unit is often left to navigate the cultural transition alone.

Originally, I envisioned a broad social network or forum where parents could freely post questions, complain about challenges, and discuss schools.

However, during the interview with an ELL teacher, a critical design risk was identified. When I proposed a platform for sharing stories, the teacher cautioned that without careful moderation, such a platform could become a venue for "naming and shaming" teachers or schools, which would alienate the very educational partners we needed to engage.

"I have not met a teacher who does not want the best for the kids... coming from that perspective, you're more likely to get buy-in... than if you set something up that is sort of a place where people just come and complain." — Teacher

Based on this feedback, I fundamentally redesigned the architecture of the site:

1. Removal of Comments: I removed the ability for users to post unmoderated comments or discussions to prevent toxicity and protect privacy.
2. Curated Content: The model shifted from a "forum" to a "digital magazine/hub." Stories are submitted via a secure form and vetted before publication.
3. Strength-Based Focus: The content strategy was adjusted to focus on shared experiences and resilience rather than grievances, ensuring the platform serves as a constructive "digital tūrangawaewae" (place to stand).

The live prototype (https://newkiwikids.co.nz) now features:

- "Our Stories": A section for curated, anonymous testimonials that validate the feelings of new families.
- "Navigating NZ": Practical guides on the education system (e.g., "What is a whānau class?", "Understanding play-based learning").
- Safe Submission: A secure submission portal that ensures anonymity for parents sharing vulnerable stories.

Output 2: Culture in a Click Teacher Training Platform (cultureinaclick.co.nz)

The survey data was unequivocal regarding the challenges facing educators: 90.9% of teachers cited "Lack of Time" as their primary barrier to supporting expatriate students, while an identical percentage reported receiving no specific

training. This created a clear design constraint: any solution requiring significant "sit-down" study time was destined to fail in a real-world classroom environment.

During my research, the same ELL teacher, who pointed out the critical design risk in the previous output, recommended a physical book titled New to New Zealand, which contained excellent cultural summaries. However, while the content was valuable, the format, as a text-heavy manual, was unsuitable for a teacher already overwhelmed by administrative tasks. My design objective, therefore, became "friction reduction." I needed to deliver the depth of that textbook in a format that respected the teacher's limited bandwidth.

This led to the development of the live prototype (https://cultureinaclick.co.nz), which utilizes an "audio-first" architecture. I designed the platform to function similarly to a podcast, allowing teachers to select a country (e.g., "Brazil") and listen to a 10–15 minute cultural overview while driving to work or setting up the classroom. To ensure immediate practical application, I introduced the concept of "The Golden Minute." This feature provides an instant native-language greeting tool, such as a button to hear "Olá, tudo bem?", empowering the teacher to break the ice in the student's mother tongue on Day One. This solution respects the teacher's time while ensuring the student feels culturally validated from the moment they arrive.

Output 3: AI Interpreter Tool ("VoiceLink")

The inspiration for this tool came from a personal failure of technology. When my son was kicked on a basketball court, he could not explain the context of the provocation to the teacher because standard translation tools are transactional, they translate words but ignore emotion. My findings confirmed that this "context gap" is a common failure point. Relying on static tools like Google Translate often leaves children voiceless during high-stress moments like conflict resolution.

I realized that these children did not just need a dictionary, they needed an advocate. This led to the concept of the "VoiceLink" a context-aware AI designed to act as an emotional buffer between the student and the educator. I mapped a specific interaction flow to de-escalate stress. Rather than

immediately broadcasting the translation, the AI first responds to the child in their native language to validate their feelings (e.g., "I understand. Don't worry, I will tell the teacher for you"). Only then does it synthesize the situation into clear English for the teacher.

Given the vulnerability of the users, ethical safeguards are being incorporated into the architecture. To address concerns about data sovereignty and privacy, the tool will function as a transit channel. No audio or text conversation recordings will be stored. This will ensure that the technology serves as a safe "transitional object," reducing the anxiety of the "silent period" and allowing the child to maintain their autonomy without compromising their privacy. Although a live prototype has been deployed (https://voicelink.co.nz), access is currently limited. This restriction is intentional, allowing for the resolution of outstanding privacy issues and the stabilization of occasional glitches in the OpenAI API arising from the complexity of the programming.

ETHICS BY DESIGN

While the previous research questions focused on identifying challenges and evaluating support systems, this final inquiry shifts the focus to the solution itself. I chose to address this question within the Design Process because ethical considerations are architectural constraints that fundamentally shaped the development of the prototypes. The decision to use AI and digital platforms to support vulnerable minors requires a specific ethical framework.

> Research Sub-Question 5
> **What ethical considerations arise from using emerging disruptive technologies to support expatriate children, and how can these be addressed?**

The deployment of disruptive technology in a pastoral care context raises three primary ethical risks: Data Sovereignty and Privacy, Algorithmic Bias, and Human Displacement. These risks were addressed through specific "Ethics by Design" decisions in the prototyping phase.

Data Sovereignty and the protection of minors. The most significant ethical concern regarding the "VoiceLink" AI tool is the potential collection and storage of sensitive conversations involving minors. To align with data privacy standards, I am trying to reject the standard industry model of retaining user data for model training. Instead, the architecture is being designed as a "Transient Conduit." As detailed in the VoiceLink design specifications, the system will process language in real-time but will be hard-coded to delete the data immediately upon translation.

Mitigation of Toxicity and Harm. Digital platforms often carry the risk of becoming vectors for negativity or "naming and shaming," which could damage the school-home partnership. This consideration directly dictated the architecture of the New Kiwi Kids Support Hub. As highlighted in the design process, the initial concept of an open forum was abandoned in favor of a curated, unmoderated model. By removing the comment function and vetting all submissions, the platform ethically prioritizes community safety and constructive resilience over unmonitored engagement, ensuring the tool remains a "safe harbour" for families.

Augmentation vs. Displacement. There is an ethical risk that schools may view technology as a "solution" that absolves them of the need for human connection—essentially "outsourcing" care to an algorithm. To counter this, both the Teacher Training Platform and the AI Interpreter were designed as "Bridges," not destinations. The AI Interpreter does not solve the conflict. It translates the context so the teacher can solve it. Similarly, the "Culture in a Click" platform does not replace deep cultural learning. It provides the "Golden Minute" greeting to ignite a human relationship. These design choices ensure that technology remains an augmenter of human care, keeping the teacher as the primary duty-bearer of student wellbeing.

5.RECOMMENDATIONS

While the technological outputs of this study (Support Hub, Teacher Training Platform, and AI Interpreter) provide immediate and "low-friction" support tools, technology alone cannot solve systemic deficiencies. The findings of this research highlighted structural gaps in communication, leadership perception, and the allocation of pedagogical time. Therefore, the following recommendations are proposed to address organizational culture and workflows within schools, independently of digital interventions.

Recommendation 1: Eliminate the Pre-Arrival Information Gap

A critical failure point identified in the Teachers' Survey was the lack of preparatory data. 54.5% of teachers reported having "no information" about the number or nationality of incoming expatriate students before the school year began. This forces teachers to react on "Day One" rather than prepare, increasing anxiety for both educator and child.

The Recommendation: Schools should implement a "pre-arrival cultural snapshot" protocol. Administrative teams, who often hold enrollment data weeks in advance, could formalize the transfer of this information to classroom teachers at least one week before the student's classes begin. This should not be a raw data dump from the enrolment form, but a summarized "Snapshot Card" containing:

- Name and Phonetic Pronunciation (if possible): Ensuring that the teacher pronounces the student's name correctly from the start.
- Country of Origin and Languages Spoken: To allow the teacher to prepare a basic greeting (using the Culture in a Click tool).
- Previous Educational Context: (e.g., "Comes from a rigid rote learning system" vs. "Play-based learning").

This shifts the teacher's state from "reactive" to "proactive," allowing them to set up the classroom environment (e.g., a label on the desk, a specific book on display) that signals Manaakitanga (welcome) before the child walks through the door.

Recommendation 2: Realigning Leadership Perception with Classroom Reality

The research exposed a dangerous "Confidence Gap." While principals generally rated their staff's ability to support expatriate children at a 4 out of 5, the teachers themselves rated their confidence significantly lower (typically 2/5 or 3/5), with 90.9% citing a lack of specific training. As noted in the findings, if leadership assumes capacity exists where it does not, resources are not allocated, and teachers are left feeling unsupported and overwhelmed.

The Recommendation: School leadership could institute a termly "Pastoral Capacity Check." Instead of presuming professional capacity, administration should conduct brief, anonymous surveys with specific questions for teachers, such as: "Do you feel prepared to support the cultural needs of the current students in your class?" or "What is the biggest barrier you faced this week regarding these students (e.g., time, language, resources)?"

This feedback loop forces the "invisible" struggle of the teacher into the view of the administration. It moves the conversation from generic "ESOL support" to specific resource allocation, validating the teacher's reality and opening the door for targeted micro professional development (like the Culture in a Click platform) rather than generic whole-staff training that consumes valuable time.

Recommendation 3: Repositioning ESOL Classes as Cultural Sanctuaries

The primary barrier for mainstream teachers is time (90.9%). They simply do not have the bandwidth to conduct deep cultural validation work in a class full of students. However, expatriate students typically attend ESOL classes 3 to 4 times a week in much smaller groups. Currently, these classes often focus heavily on functional linguistics (grammar, vocabulary).

The Recommendation: ESOL sessions should be reframed using **Kaupapa Māori** principles to prioritize cultural validation over simply language learning. The ESOL classroom should function as a "Third Culture" space where the child's identity is upheld (Taonga tuku iho) before academic demands are placed upon them. This approach can be translated into concrete pedagogical practices throughout the school week.

In the first ESOL class of the week, for example, the priority could shift from English compliance to cultural validation, grounded in Taonga tuku iho (treasures from the ancestors). Instead of opening with a standard English greeting, the educator might invite each student to greet the group in their home language, with the cohort repeating it back. This simple yet profound shift signals that the child's "home voice" holds mana (power) within the educational space, ensuring their linguistic identity is acknowledged before the academic week begins.

On another day, or perhaps as a regular "soft start" to sessions, the focus could turn to emotional regulation through the application of Manaakitanga (care for the person). Teachers might utilize a visual "Mauri-o-meter" to gauge the students' internal state, inviting them to point to their current feeling. By allowing students to articulate their state in either English or their native tongue, the educator validates that the feelings of displacement often associated with ECS are permissible and safe, ensuring the child feels "seen" before they are taught.

Furthermore, within the standard curriculum instruction, the principle of Ako (reciprocal learning) can be employed to bridge the gap between English concepts and the child's lived experience. When introducing a new topic, such as food or family structures, the teacher could first ask students to describe the concept in the context of their country of origin, writing the native term alongside the English vocabulary. This approach flips the power dynamic from a model where the child is defined by what they do not know to a model where the student becomes the expert who teaches the educator.

By dedicating a few minutes of the week to this, the ESOL class transforms from a place where the child is "fixed" (taught English) to a place where they are "found" (culturally validated). This directly addresses the isolation and identity loss central to Expat Child Syndrome, without adding to the workload of the mainstream classroom teacher.

6. CRITICAL REFLECTION ON MY LEARNING OUTCOMES

This research journey has been a profound exercise in professional and personal recalibration. Returning to academia after a career in innovation and design required me to shift from a "solution-first" mindset to an "inquiry-first" discipline, and this was by far the greatest challenge I faced throughout the entire master's program. Even today, I still need to continually remind myself to slow down and sustain doubt before rushing to the answer. It's a shift I'm still learning to fully embrace, in a constant internal process. It was in this transition that my most significant learning occurred, aligning directly with the Learning Outcomes of the Master's in Technological Futures.

My initial understanding of "disruptive technology" was functional, viewing AI primarily as a tool for efficiency. Through this project, specifically the development of VoiceLink and Culture in a Click, I evolved that understanding to see technology as a support tool. I learned to address the ethical limitations of AI when applied to vulnerable minors. This required me to develop new technical capabilities in API integration and privacy-by-design architectures, ensuring that my professional practice remains current and ethically robust in an era of rapid digital change.

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of this learning journey has been the integration of Kaupapa Māori values into my research methodology. Initially, I saw them as ethical guidelines, however, they became the operating system of the entire project. Learning to apply Whanaungatanga (relationship building) transformed my data collection from a transactional extraction of information to a reciprocal dialogue with parents and teachers. By consulting with principals, English as a Second Language teachers, and expatriate families, I learned that true leadership in complex environments is not about imposing answers, but about co-creating solutions that respect the mana of all stakeholders.

The rigorous process of systematic planning, from ethical approval to data triangulation, taught me the discipline necessary to produce knowledge that is not only "interesting" but "defensible." I learned that an original contribution to

knowledge is not always a brand-new invention. Often, it is the systematic validation of an "invisible" problem. By quantifying the "Confidence Gap" between principals and teachers, I was able to provide the community with tangible evidence of a systemic problem, transforming anecdotal conversation into action. This experience equipped me with the skills necessary to identify, measure, and solve complex real-world problems, ensuring that my future work adds genuine value to the communities I serve.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: FROM PROTOTYPE TO SYSTEMIC IMPACT

Reflecting on the limitations of this study, particularly the absence of live user testing, I recognize that my growth as a practitioner cannot end with the submission of this thesis. I have formulated a specific forward plan to transition my prototypes from theoretical models to applied solutions.

Phase Four: The "Living Lab" Pilot

Phase 4 of this project will capitalize on the interest expressed during my data collection, where eleven school principals have explicitly requested the final research results, representing a ready-made cohort for a pilot study. I intend to approach these schools to act as “Living Labs” to evaluate and inform future improvements of VoiceLink and Culture in a Click. This shift from a researcher to an implementation lead role will require the development of new professional competencies, particularly in stakeholder management, technical deployment, and impact measurement.

To validate the efficacy of these tools, I have developed an evaluative framework that moves beyond satisfaction surveys to measure tangible impact:

- **Teacher workload:** I will track whether Culture in a Click reduces the "friction" of cultural preparation through teacher surveys. Success will be measured by a reduction in the time teachers spend searching for cultural resources, aiming to validate the "zero-prep" design goal.
- **Communication Clarity & De-escalation:** For VoiceLink, success will be assessed through qualitative interviews focusing on conflict resolution

incidents. These interviews will explore whether the AI's "context-aware" design helps prevent behavioral escalation commonly caused by linguistic misunderstanding.

- **Parent Engagement:** Parent uptake and engagement with the New Kiwi Kids Hub will be evaluated using analytics data extracted from the platform (e.g., usage frequency, access patterns, return visits, and session duration) to assess whether the tool reduces the isolation reported in parent testimonials.

Participation will remain voluntary and confidential, following the same ethical posture established in the research instruments for this project.

Phase Five: Scaling and Sustainability

Following the validation of these tools in the pilot environment, Phase 5 focuses on large-scale implementation and long-term viability. An acknowledged limitation of this study was the reliance on "goodwill" rather than systemic structure. Therefore, this phase will involve:

- **Strategic Partnerships:** Seeking collaboration with the Ministry of Education and migrant support NGOs to integrate these tools into broader induction frameworks.
- **Funding and Infrastructure:** Developing a sustainable funding model to support the server costs and API maintenance required for AI-driven tools like VoiceLink, ensuring they remain accessible to lower-decile schools.
- **Ecosystem Integration:** Moving beyond standalone prototypes to integrate these solutions with existing Student Management Systems (SMS) used in New Zealand schools.

Leading this evolution from Phase 4 to Phase 5 will force me to evolve from a designer of static products to a leader of dynamic systems, ensuring that my professional practice continues to develop in response to real-world educational feedback.

7. CONCLUSION

This thesis began with a single incident on a basketball court. A moment of silence where a child lost his voice and his agency. That personal experience served as the catalyst for an investigation that uncovered a much wider, systemic silence affecting non-English speaking expatriate children across Aotearoa New Zealand.

The research confirms that Expat Child Syndrome (ECS) is a tangible reality in our primary schools, manifesting not just as a language barrier, but as a profound disruption of identity and belonging. The findings reveal a school system rich in intent but poor in capacity. While principals and policies aim for inclusivity, the classroom reality is defined by time-poor teachers (90.9% citing lack of time) and isolated families.

In response, this study shows that we cannot solve this gap with traditional teacher training alone. Instead, we must leverage disruptive technologies to bridge the gap between human capacity and human need. The three outputs developed in this research demonstrate that technology, when designed with ethical rigour and cultural empathy, can act as a powerful "transitional object."

However, tools alone are not the answer. They must be embedded in a pedagogical culture that values Whanaungatanga and Manaakitanga. The recommendations to realign leadership perceptions and reposition ESOL classes as cultural sanctuaries offer a pathway to institutionalize this care.

Ultimately, this research serves as a call to action. It challenges educators and policymakers to look beyond the "ESOL" label and see the child beneath. A child who does not need to be "fixed," but simply needs to be heard. By combining the speed of AI with the warmth of Kaupapa Māori values, we can ensure that the school gate becomes a threshold of belonging, rather than a barrier of silence, for every new child who calls Aotearoa home.

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9. APPENDICES

Appendix 01

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Interview Guide for Parents/Caregivers

Background Information
Goal: Understand the child's background and migration context to help interpret their adjustment experience.

- Can you tell me a little about your child (age, country of origin, native language)?
- When did your family move to New Zealand?

School Transition Experience
Goal: Identify the child's initial experience with school integration, especially in relation to language and support received.

- What was your child's English level when they started school here? no , few words, ... fluent
- What challenges did your child encounter and how did him/her adjust to the these challenges?
- What support did you and your child receive from the school (e.g., ESOL classes, teacher aide, computer apps)? Was it helpful?

Emotional and Social Wellbeing
Goal: Explore emotional and social challenges the child may face, such as isolation, homesickness, or exclusion.

- How has your child felt about moving to Aotearora (excited, scared, optimistic, afraid, etc...) (sadness, stress, frustration, or withdrawal)?
- How easy or difficult has it been for your child to make friends?
- Does your child talk about feeling included or excluded at school (academic and social)?

Academic Adjustment
Goal: Discover any academic barriers due to language or differences in curriculum and learning styles.

- Has your child experienced any academic difficulties due to the language barrier or different teaching styles?
- Are there particular subjects or classroom situations they struggle with more than others?
- How do teachers communicate with you about your child's progress and needs?

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Appendix 02

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Home Environment and Support
Goal: Understand how the home environment contributes to or supports the child's adaptation process.

- How does your family support your child's language learning or adaptation at home?
- What kind of emotional or practical support does your child need from you?
- Do you feel well-supported by the school or community? If not, what's missing?

Kaupapa Māori Values and Cultural Identity
Goal: Explore the role of identity, belonging, and culturally affirming practices in the child's adjustment.

- Do you feel your child's cultural identity and home language are acknowledged or valued in their school?
- Dou you think your child's able to maintain his/her cultural identity
- Are there any school practices or community programs that help your child feel a sense of belonging?
- How do you and your child maintain a connection to your cultural roots and traditions while living in New Zealand?
- Have you seen examples of care, inclusion, or cultural respect that have helped your child settle and grow?
- What would help your child feel more empowered or proud of their identity in this new environment?

Reflections and Suggestions
Goal: Gather parent/caregivers reflections and recommendations that could inform broader support policies.

- What have been the biggest challenges for you since moving to New Zealand?
- What changes or supports do you think would help other children in a similar situation?
- |What you advise for families facing the same situation (just arriving in New Zealand)
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your child's experience?

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Appendix 03

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Interview Guide for Teachers

Introduction & Background
Goal: To understand the teacher's context and familiarity with culturally and linguistically diverse students.

- How long have you been teaching?
- On average, how many non-English-speaking children do you usually have in your classroom? And how many do you have this year?

Initial Observations & First Impressions
Goal: To explore how teachers perceive non-English-speaking children and their early adaptation.

- In those first few weeks of school, what kinds of challenges do you notice, both for you and for the kids, academically and socially?

Language and Communication
Goal: To identify language-related challenges and their impacts.

- What kind of support does the school offer to help with language acquisition? (e.g. training, mentoring, tools, digital resources, etc.)
- Are there any strategies or approaches you've found particularly helpful when working with non-English-speaking students?

Classroom Engagement and Participation
Goal: To investigate if quiet behavior leads to under-recognition of needs.

- Are there any common behavioural traits you've noticed in these students? (For example, would you say they tend to be quieter or less likely to participate?)
- Do you think there's a risk that these students might go unnoticed or slip through the cracks?
- *How do you make sure they're getting the support they need (academically, socially, emotionally, and culturally)?*

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Appendix 04

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Teacher Awareness and Training
Goal: To understand teacher readiness and knowledge.

- *How do you usually pick up on emotional or academic struggles in these students, especially if language is a barrier?*
- How do you identify emotional or academic struggles in these children?

School-Level Support
Goal: To explore systemic support and resource availability.

- *Have you had any specific training in dealing with children from other cultures who don't speak English?*

Kaupapa Māori Values
Goal: To reflect on cultural responsiveness using indigenous principles.

- Does your classroom or school incorporate any Kaupapa Māori values, and if so, how do non-English-speaking students respond to them?
- Do you see any similarities between supporting Māori learners and supporting expatriate or immigrant learners?

Reflections & Recommendations
Goal: To gather general insights and recommendations.

- What advice would you give to a new teacher receiving non-English-speaking students for the first time?
- Can you think of a particular student or situation that stands out to you—something that's stuck with you, in a good way or a challenging one?

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Appendix 05

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Interview Guide for School Principal

Introduction & Background
Goal: To understand the principal's leadership context and familiarity with **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)** students.

- Can you briefly describe your role and the context of your school (size, community, demographics)?
- How would you describe the presence and diversity of non-English-speaking students in your school?
- Have you noticed any changes in the demographics of your school community in recent years?

School-Wide Observations
Goal: To explore school-level insights into how non-English-speaking students adjust.

- From your perspective, what are some common initial challenges non-English-speaking expatriate students face when they join your school?
- How do these students generally integrate into the school community over time?
- Are there noticeable emotional or behavioural patterns in their adaptation phase?

Language and Communication Support
Goal: To identify how language challenges are addressed through leadership and resources.

- How does your school support students who are still acquiring English, both in and outside the classroom?
- Do you feel your staff have adequate support or training to assist students with significant language barriers?
- Are there any partnerships or resources (e.g., ESOL specialists, interpreters, community liaisons) that your school uses?

Identification and Inclusion
Goal: To understand how needs are identified and responded to systemically.

- How are the needs of quieter or less participative non-English-speaking students identified at your school?
- What systems are in place to ensure these students are consistently identified and addressed?
- Do you think there are gaps in how schools identify emotional or social distress in CALD students??

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Appendix 06

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Staff Capability and Professional Development
Goal: To assess school-wide readiness and awareness.

- Has your staff received professional learning related to supporting non-English-speaking or migrant learners?
- Are there structures in place to share good practice or challenges among teachers regarding CALD learners?
- In your view, what do teachers need most in order to feel better equipped?

Leadership and Policy
Goal: To explore how leadership decisions affect support structures.

- How do you approach decision-making around resourcing and staffing for supporting CALD students?
- Are there policies or frameworks at your school or within your cluster that guide inclusive practice for these learners?
- How do you engage with families of non-English-speaking students? Are there challenges or successes you'd highlight?

Reflections & Recommendations
Goal: To gather broader insights and actionable suggestions.

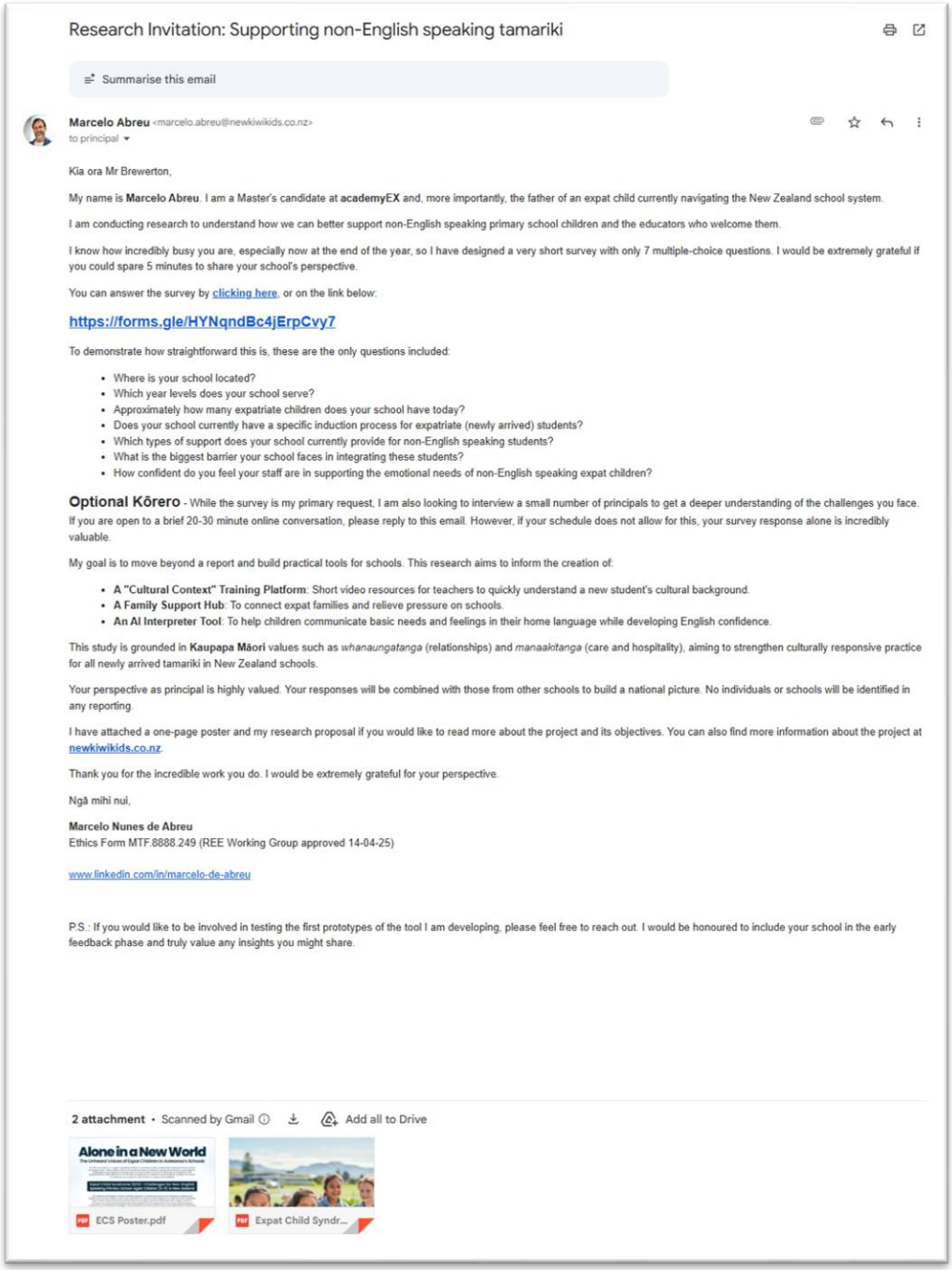
- Can you share an example of a success story or a particularly challenging case involving a non-English-speaking expatriate student or family?
- What advice would you give to a principal in a similar school welcoming a wave of non-English-speaking students for the first time?
- From a leadership perspective, what system-level changes (at school or national level) do you believe would make the biggest impact?

Kaupapa Māori Values
Goal: To reflect on cultural responsiveness and parallels with indigenous values.

- In what ways does your school incorporate Kaupapa Māori principles like *whanaungatanga*, *manaakitanga*, or *aroha*?
- Do you see any shared values or parallels between supporting Māori learners and supporting non-English-speaking expatriate learners?
- How might these principles help inform a more inclusive and responsive school culture?

2

Appendix 07



Research Invitation: Supporting non-English speaking tamariki

Summarise this email

Marcelo Abreu <marcelo.abreu@newkiwikids.co.nz>
to principal

Kia ora Mr Brewerton,

My name is **Marcelo Abreu**. I am a Master's candidate at **academyEX** and, more importantly, the father of an expat child currently navigating the New Zealand school system.

I am conducting research to understand how we can better support non-English speaking primary school children and the educators who welcome them.

I know how incredibly busy you are, especially now at the end of the year, so I have designed a very short survey with only 7 multiple-choice questions. I would be extremely grateful if you could spare 5 minutes to share your school's perspective.

You can answer the survey by clicking here, or on the link below:

https://forms.gle/HYNqndBc4jErpCvy7

To demonstrate how straightforward this is, these are the only questions included:

- Where is your school located?
- Which year levels does your school serve?
- Approximately how many expatriate children does your school have today?
- Does your school currently have a specific induction process for expatriate (newly arrived) students?
- Which types of support does your school currently provide for non-English speaking students?
- What is the biggest barrier your school faces in integrating these students?
- How confident do you feel your staff are in supporting the emotional needs of non-English speaking expat children?

Optional Kōrero - While the survey is my primary request, I am also looking to interview a small number of principals to get a deeper understanding of the challenges you face. If you are open to a brief 20-30 minute online conversation, please reply to this email. However, if your schedule does not allow for this, your survey response alone is incredibly valuable.

My goal is to move beyond a report and build practical tools for schools. This research aims to inform the creation of:

- **A "Cultural Context" Training Platform**: Short video resources for teachers to quickly understand a new student's cultural background.
- **A Family Support Hub**: To connect expat families and relieve pressure on schools.
- **An AI Interpreter Tool**: To help children communicate basic needs and feelings in their home language while developing English confidence.

This study is grounded in **Kaupapa Māori** values such as *whanaungatanga* (relationships) and *manaakitanga* (care and hospitality), aiming to strengthen culturally responsive practice for all newly arrived tamariki in New Zealand schools.

Your perspective as principal is highly valued. Your responses will be combined with those from other schools to build a national picture. No individuals or schools will be identified in any reporting.

I have attached a one-page poster and my research proposal if you would like to read more about the project and its objectives. You can also find more information about the project at newkiwikids.co.nz.

Thank you for the incredible work you do. I would be extremely grateful for your perspective.

Ngā mihi nui,

Marcelo Nunes de Abreu
Ethics Form MTF.8888.249 (REE Working Group approved 14-04-25)

www.linkedin.com/in/marcelo-de-abreu

P.S.: If you would like to be involved in testing the first prototypes of the tool I am developing, please feel free to reach out. I would be honoured to include your school in the early feedback phase and truly value any insights you might share.

2 attachment • Scanned by Gmail ⓘ Add all to Drive

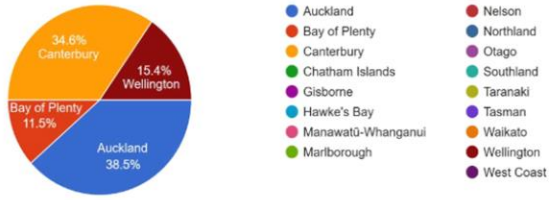
Appendix 08

Principals Survey Results

Supporting Newly Arrived Primary School Children in Aotearoa New Zealand

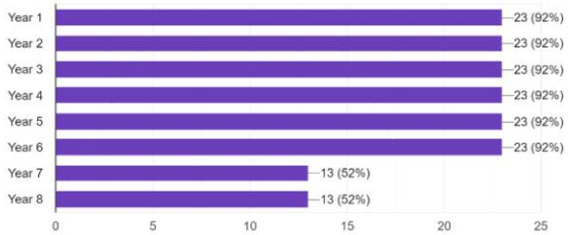
Where is your school located?

26 responses



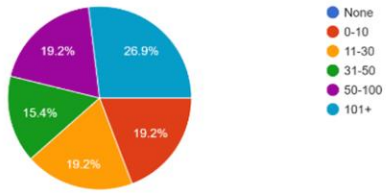
Which year levels does your school serve?

25 responses



Approximately how many expatriate (newly arrived in New Zealand, regardless of visa type or immigration status) children does your school have today?

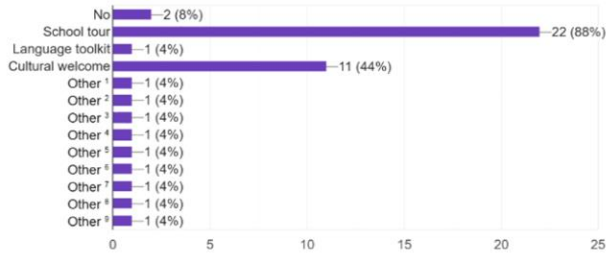
26 responses



Appendix 09

Does your school currently have a specific induction process for expatriate (newly arrived) students?

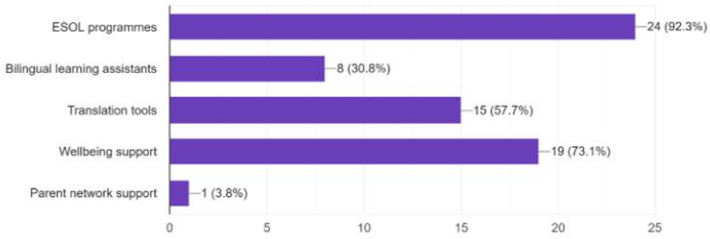
25 responses



1. Extended admissions process
2. Enrolment meeting with the APrincipal or Deptuy Principal (around an hour), we discuss how our school day runs, how to prepare for school, communication, timetable etc - we also take time to find out about the family and student to support transition and unserdtand how to support them.
3. Onboarding family meeting with the enrolment team and Principal
4. orientation, early assessment to establish English level, supplementary classroom resources provided (often translated)
5. ESOL teacher time access
6. Mihi Whakatau, ESOL Supplementary Form, school tour when requested
7. Meeting with Cultural Lead Teacher, bilingual support if Chinese, teachers who are experienced in teaching migrant children and connecting with their whānau
8. student buddies, meet the teacher meeting,
9. Differentiated classes for students with low literacy rates

Which types of support does your school currently provide for non-English speaking students?

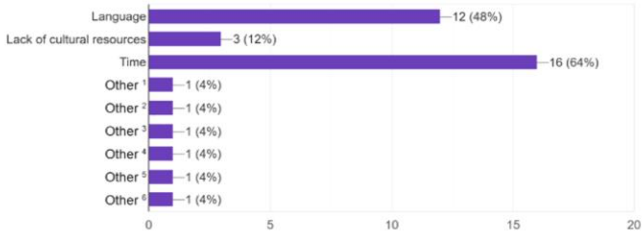
26 responses



Appendix 10

What is the biggest barrier your school faces in integrating these students?

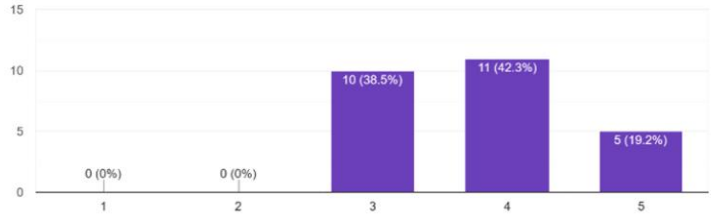
25 responses



1. NA, students integrate well
2. Time to prepare them for assessments.
3. Staffing
4. Parents reading our school communication pathways and staying up todate
5. Lack of space to support ie/ ESOL room
6. Presently, we do not have many students. International students paying students come in Yr 9 and 10.

How confident do you feel your staff are in supporting the emotional needs of non-English speaking expat children?

26 responses



Is there anything you would like to add regarding your experience working with expatriate or non-English-speaking students?

8 responses

1. This demographic make up 3/4 of our school
2. The HOD of ESOL is supportive and patience and speak 4 languages.
3. Support, relationships and connection with and from Embassies is helpful
4. We work hard at our school to be inclusive and welcoming
5. Other behavioural issues make it even more challenging to support ELLs, especially when there is aggression involved. A standardised ESOL programme would be beneficial for kaiāwhina who are the ones who do the majority of the work with the learners.

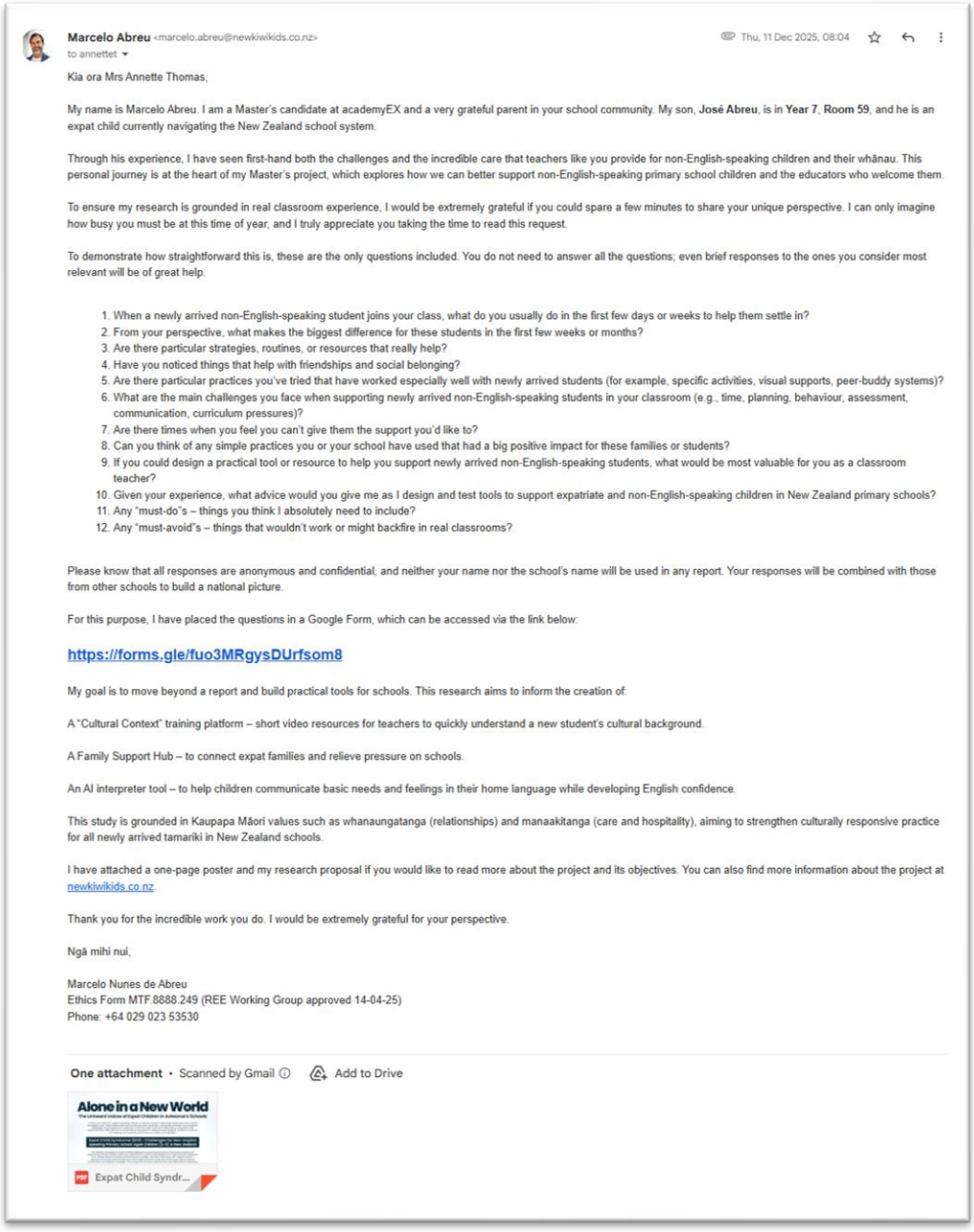
Appendix 11

6. We are finding that older migrant children with no English find it hardest to asjust to life in a NZ school
7. Counselling
8. Learning is differentiated in our Year 7-8 part of college. Specific programmes are available for students who are not meeting curriculum targets.

If you would like to receive a brief summary of the findings and a copy of the final report, please enter your email address below. Your email address will be stored separately from your survey responses.

11 responses

Appendix 12



Marcelo Abreu <marcelo.abreu@newkiwikids.co.nz>
to annettet

Thu, 11 Dec 2025, 08:04

Kia ora Mrs Annette Thomas,

My name is Marcelo Abreu. I am a Master's candidate at academyEX and a very grateful parent in your school community. My son, **José Abreu**, is in **Year 7**, **Room 59**, and he is an expat child currently navigating the New Zealand school system.

Through his experience, I have seen first-hand both the challenges and the incredible care that teachers like you provide for non-English-speaking children and their whānau. This personal journey is at the heart of my Master's project, which explores how we can better support non-English-speaking primary school children and the educators who welcome them.

To ensure my research is grounded in real classroom experience, I would be extremely grateful if you could spare a few minutes to share your unique perspective. I can only imagine how busy you must be at this time of year, and I truly appreciate you taking the time to read this request.

To demonstrate how straightforward this is, these are the only questions included. You do not need to answer all the questions; even brief responses to the ones you consider most relevant will be of great help.

1. When a newly arrived non-English-speaking student joins your class, what do you usually do in the first few days or weeks to help them settle in?
2. From your perspective, what makes the biggest difference for these students in the first few weeks or months?
3. Are there particular strategies, routines, or resources that really help?
4. Have you noticed things that help with friendships and social belonging?
5. Are there particular practices you've tried that have worked especially well with newly arrived students (for example, specific activities, visual supports, peer-buddy systems)?
6. What are the main challenges you face when supporting newly arrived non-English-speaking students in your classroom (e.g., time, planning, behaviour, assessment, communication, curriculum pressures)?
7. Are there times when you feel you can't give them the support you'd like to?
8. Can you think of any simple practices you or your school have used that had a big positive impact for these families or students?
9. If you could design a practical tool or resource to help you support newly arrived non-English-speaking students, what would be most valuable for you as a classroom teacher?
10. Given your experience, what advice would you give me as I design and test tools to support expatriate and non-English-speaking children in New Zealand primary schools?
11. Any "must-do"s – things you think I absolutely need to include?
12. Any "must-avoid"s – things that wouldn't work or might backfire in real classrooms?

Please know that all responses are anonymous and confidential, and neither your name nor the school's name will be used in any report. Your responses will be combined with those from other schools to build a national picture.

For this purpose, I have placed the questions in a Google Form, which can be accessed via the link below:

https://forms.gle/fuo3MRgysDUrfsom8

My goal is to move beyond a report and build practical tools for schools. This research aims to inform the creation of:

A "Cultural Context" training platform – short video resources for teachers to quickly understand a new student's cultural background.

A Family Support Hub – to connect expat families and relieve pressure on schools.

An AI interpreter tool – to help children communicate basic needs and feelings in their home language while developing English confidence.

This study is grounded in Kaupapa Māori values such as whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (care and hospitality), aiming to strengthen culturally responsive practice for all newly arrived tamariki in New Zealand schools.

I have attached a one-page poster and my research proposal if you would like to read more about the project and its objectives. You can also find more information about the project at newkiwikids.co.nz.

Thank you for the incredible work you do. I would be extremely grateful for your perspective.

Ngā mihi nui,

Marcelo Nunes de Abreu
Ethics Form MTF 8888.249 (REE Working Group approved 14-04-25)
Phone: +64 029 023 53530

One attachment • Scanned by Gmail ⓘ Add to Drive

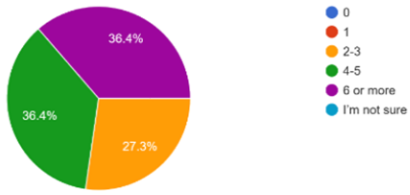
Appendix 13

Teachers Survey Results

Supporting Newly Arrived Primary School Children in Aotearoa New Zealand

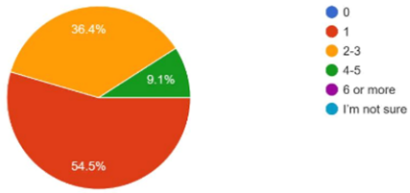
How many expatriate students (newly arrived in New Zealand) do you currently have, or have you previously had, in your class?

11 responses



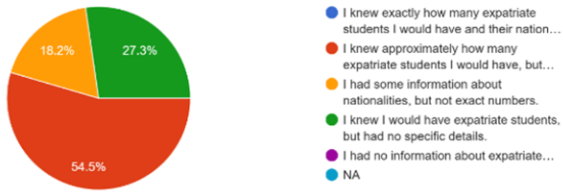
Of these expatriate students, how many are not fluent in English?

11 responses



Before the start of the school year, did you have information about how many expatriate students would be in your class and what their nationalities would be?

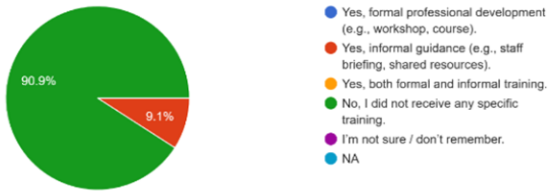
11 responses



Appendix 14

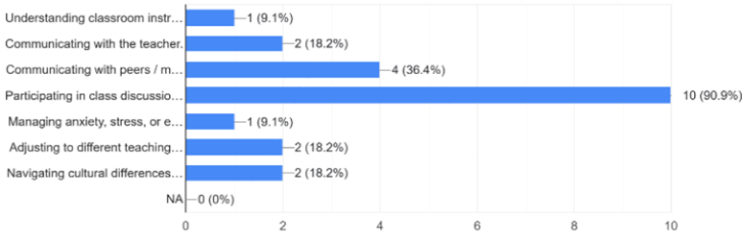
Did you receive any training or preparation specifically related to supporting expatriate / newly arrived non-English speaking students?

11 responses



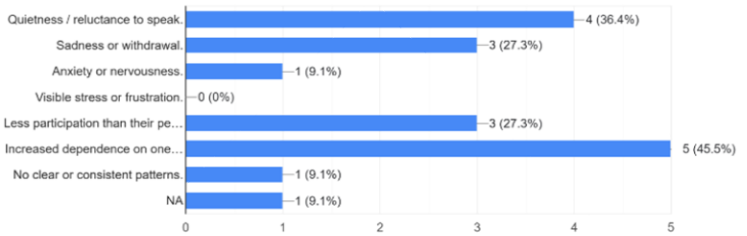
In the first weeks of class, what are the main challenges you see expatriate students face?

11 responses



Do you notice any common patterns in how expatriate students behave or present in your class?

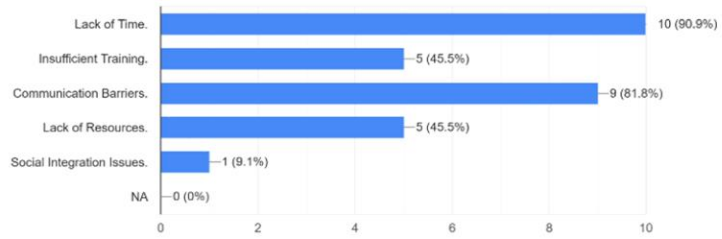
11 responses



Appendix 15

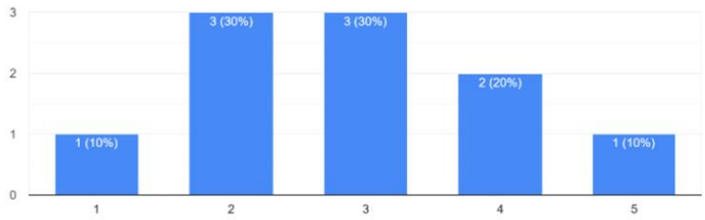
What are the most significant barriers you encounter when trying to support non-English speaking expatriate students in your classroom?

11 responses



How confident do you feel in supporting the emotional needs of non-English speaking expatriate children in your class?

10 responses



If you'd like to add anything about your experience supporting expatriate or non-English speaking students, please use the space below.

2 responses

A few days before classes begin, I hold individual meetings with students' parents. During these meetings, I learn each student's nationality and identify those who may have difficulties with the language.

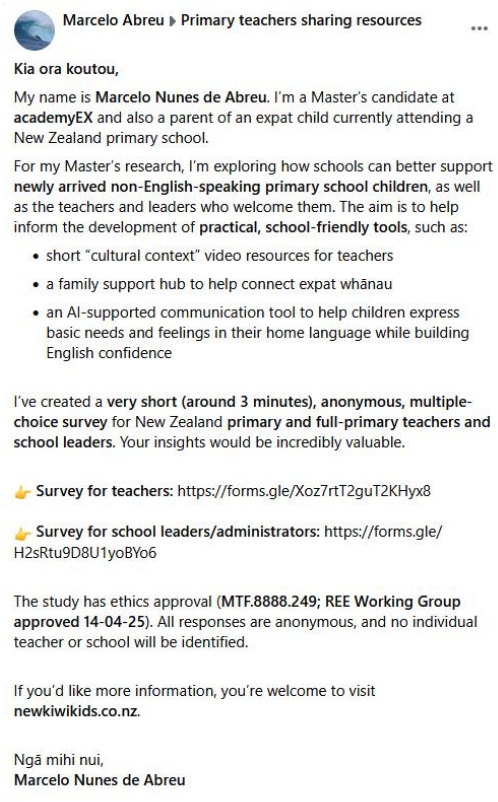
The biggest challenge with expat or non fluent English speakers is being able to find the time to help them.

If you would like to receive a brief summary of the findings and a copy of the final report, please enter your email address below. Your email address will be stored separately from your survey responses.

2 responses

Appendix 16


Primary teachers sharing resources
Public Group · 56.7 thousand members
+ Invite
Share
Entered
Awaiting approval from the administrator
1 post Learn more
Manage posts


Marcelo Abreu ▸ Primary teachers sharing resources
Kia ora koutou,
My name is Marcelo Nunes de Abreu. I'm a Master's candidate at academyEX and also a parent of an expat child currently attending a New Zealand primary school.
For my Master's research, I'm exploring how schools can better support newly arrived non-English-speaking primary school children, as well as the teachers and leaders who welcome them. The aim is to help inform the development of practical, school-friendly tools, such as:
• short "cultural context" video resources for teachers
• a family support hub to help connect expat whānau
• an AI-supported communication tool to help children express basic needs and feelings in their home language while building English confidence
I've created a very short (around 3 minutes), anonymous, multiple-choice survey for New Zealand primary and full-primary teachers and school leaders. Your insights would be incredibly valuable.
👉 Survey for teachers: https://forms.gle/Xoz7rtT2guT2KHyx8
👉 Survey for school leaders/administrators: https://forms.gle/H2sRtu9D8U1yoBYo6
The study has ethics approval (MTF.8888.249; REE Working Group approved 14-04-25). All responses are anonymous, and no individual teacher or school will be identified.
If you'd like more information, you're welcome to visit newkiwikids.co.nz.
Ngā mihi nui,
Marcelo Nunes de Abreu


He can't find the words.
You can!