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“Efforts to support individual cultures can potentially act as a divisive force within a school. In addition to the programmes which acknowledge and support difference, the school also has to provide a school-wide philosophy which brings people together, and mutually acceptable procedures and behavioural guidelines which can form the backbone of the school community as a whole. It is in balancing the differentiating characteristics of cultures in the school with the need for an overarching school culture that the most difficult work of the multicultural school occurs.”

Key Points

• A challenge for schools is to cater adequately for their NESB students without ‘jeopardising’ the quality of teaching and learning for other students.

• Schools sometimes have to take particular care to ensure that different groups of parents/community members do not perceive their children to be ‘missing out’ due to the time and resources devoted to the needs of NESB students.

• Accommodating the needs of different students within the school and providing a balanced, up to date programme overall has implications for such matters as class size, provision of suitable and sufficient accommodation within the school, and teacher training.

• Planning the school’s overall programme, and allocating resources, is made more difficult for schools when they have little or no advance notice of the arrival of a group of NESB students to the school.

The Needs of Different Students in the School

For all schools, the need to consider the needs of different groups of students within the school, and accommodate these different needs as fully as possible, is an ongoing concern. And for some schools at least, it appears that satisfying various parent and community groups that resources within the school are allocated appropriately can be problematic.

“The board is] quite concerned about the resources and support — the inadequate support — that we have available for these children because they feel that unless we get adequate support for them the classroom teacher has to spend much more time in the classroom on these children to the detriment of other children in the class and this has been an aspect that some parents have [expressed] concerns [about] to the board. [This] has always been a multi-ethnic school and we have been very proud of our diverse community, but for us to provide adequate support for [the NESB] children we must have adequate resources, but not at the expense of the other children in the school. And that basically is their [the BOT’s] concern and they have been very supportive of my requests to the Ministry [for staffing allocations, etc] about this.” [Principal, primary school.]

“I think it concerns a lot of teachers and parents that the lack of resourcing and staffing we have to support the NESB child is attracting more of the teacher’s time at the expense of the other children in the classroom.” [Principal, primary school.]

“You will always have the situation at school where you have got your less able students who need a lot of help and then you have your very bright children who get on with the job
anyway who don’t demand your attention [but] who need it just as much and then you have got your NESB children who you are giving time to. And there are parents who sometimes comment on that: that there are NESB children, so that means that their child is not getting that time and that it’s not fair. So there is that sort of feeling sometimes [among some parents] that these children come to our country, they get extra resources. They see these children getting teacher aid and that theirs aren’t getting that. It’s not the case [as] my time is spent with them [too] but it is more noticeable, the time that is spent with [the NESB] children. [Also] we [do] resource extension programmes for brighter children and we get teachers to work with small groups of children who are bright.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

“And I feel that our Pakeha kids are missing out too, because the teachers just have not got the time with the children to fulfil [everybody’s] needs, [especially] in this particular school [which is] in a poor area where there are not the resources, not the backup. [In some schools], there’s money in the schools, the parents have money, they can put on a fair and raise $15,000, just like that. But we put on a fair here and the teachers work their butts off and we might get $400 or $500 if we’re lucky. So it’s [a matter of] having the resources there to do things with children.” [Teacher aide, special needs, primary school.]

“We do use voluntary assistance. But we don’t just target NESB students, although they do get caught up. Currently, an Asian mother who is a teacher comes into the classroom as a translator. She takes a group. In a school like this [though] there is a need to be careful as there are also Pakeha children needing assistance. [So] there is a Granny programme (all ex teachers) who work with all children who need it.” [Principal, primary school.]

“I have a real concern [about the NESB] students who come here and almost demand that they be put in at sixth or seventh form level when their English clearly says that they’re not up to that level at this stage. And the attitude of their parents is that because they were doing sixth or seventh form [studies] overseas that they should [be doing the same] here. And it actually slows up classes dramatically for our own children here. And I don’t know how you get around that.” [Board of trustees member, secondary school.]

The following passage highlights the issue of class size in balancing the needs of different students:

“I don’t think all the children who need the language input are necessarily getting it. I think it’s only the severest cases who are getting the language assistance. They can communicate with you what they need, they can decode, but they don’t understand what they do. When they write something they will be able to get the basic gist of what they want to say across but the language structure won’t be there. They can basically do a recount story where they tell you what they have done but any other sort of creative language, like poetic language or
the language of writing letters or something like that. I mean it’s like learning another language for them really, learning different language styles and things. I guess it’s the class size thing — I mean you can’t do with these children what you know you could do if you had a class of 20 because you can’t monitor their language, you can’t provide them with the input that they need when you have got 34 children [including 12 to 15 NESB students]. Less than 20 would be nice. You just can’t give them what they need [otherwise]. Instead of having five groups for reading you might only have three which would mean you could give more quality time to those groups. And, of course, you’ve still got the old problem of what you do about the bright, good English-speaking children who also need your time just as much. That’s the other side of the coin, when you have got parents [saying], ‘Well, this child needs some extension, what are you doing for them?’ So teachers are stretched too far when they have got to deal with 15 non-English-speaking children, 10 average-speaking children, and those that need extension.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

Competing Demands within the School

School have to balance many demands within the school to achieve the aim of best meeting the needs of all students. Such demands include making decisions about the curriculum and other areas in which teachers should undertake training, making decisions about how many students with particular needs the school can successfully cater for, given staffing characteristics, class sizes, community support and backup, and general resourcing, and making decisions about how best to direct efforts to achieve optimum outcomes for the school as a whole.

When asked whether their school supported teacher training in relation to the teaching and learning of NESB students, some schools in the study said that while they supported such training in principle, and tried to provide as many training opportunities in this area as possible, other priorities in the school for a particular year sometimes had to take precedence. For example:

“We support teacher training in relation to working with NESB students wherever we can [but] lately our greater emphasis has been on curriculum development because to implement the new curriculum teachers have only so much energy and so much time. ... In terms of supporting teacher training, the board and I think we try to but at the moment the priority has been on curriculum development and therefore the ability and funding resources we have to provide more teacher training in terms of ESOL classroom teachers has been very, very limited.” [Principal, primary school.]

“We haven’t sent teachers on a lot of courses [in relation to working with NESB students]. I feel that my teachers are pretty competent at doing that anyway. And we have greater needs. I think the college [of education] is a bit upset because they’ve got a contract to do a
course [for assisting NESB students] next year but we can’t take part because we’ve got other curriculum areas [to work on] — there are wider areas of education we must focus on. ... None of the teachers have received specific training [in the ESOL area], to my knowledge, unless it was before I came here. But they’re all extremely competent at working with the children — with the support of the [special needs] programme we have [in place] here. ... And our special needs coordinator did a lot of extra training on how to coordinate a special needs programme, how to set up a register, and so on, and so on. [And as well], the whole school took part in a [special] support programme [based at a local school]. We took [that programme] as a focus for the year and the whole staff met every morning at 8 o’clock for a half-hour seminar and once a term for a major seminar, and it covers all sorts [of things]. It’s got things like ‘managing children’s behaviour, IEPs [Individual Education Programmes], precision teaching, coping with stress, social skills training, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, communication and conflict resolution, sharing power and responsibility in the classroom, the reluctant learner’, and implicit in all of those you have your special needs pupils and your NESB pupils too. So every staff member who was here last year went through that entire programme, so in terms of training, we’ve all had that.” [Principal, primary school.]

Schools have to consider overall resources and capabilities in deciding how many NESB students they can successfully cater for [especially] without jeopardising other initiatives or undertakings within the school. Representative comments from two participants in the study are as follows.

“[Something that hasn’t worked particularly well] is trying to take too many [NESB] children [at once]. How many can we really cope with and [still] make sure they are able to be effective [in the classroom]?” [ESOL coordinator, primary school.]

“Sometimes the number of students from a particular culture has caused problems, the fact that we’ve had quite a large number [come in] at once. So if that happens, if you happen to get a wave in then it’s very hard work till it all settles down again. ... [And when you get a lot of the same culture together] it means that they stick together in a group, and they become quite a subgroup within the school, which [although] in one way it’s a great support for them, in another way it doesn’t help them socially, necessarily. I have six Somali boys in my class and they are not socialising at all with anybody else, not even with other boys, whereas they would have if there were less of them.” [Classroom teacher, primary school.]

Other issues in the balancing act for schools include the need for sufficient and adequate accommodation to meet the needs of different groups within the school and having advance notice of the arrival of new students with specialised needs.

“[With increasing numbers of NESB students in the school] simple things, like accommodation, become an issue. We’ve had to divert two or three classrooms over to this [ESOL] area,
and so that’s provided quite a timetabling challenge with numbers and so on.” [Principal, secondary school.]

“Space in our school has been at a premium. You can’t find a spot to put them [new NESB students] in and set them up because every little nook and cranny is full. It would be great to let [the ESOL teacher] have a base, [because, now], quite frequently, she has to have her small groups sitting on the floor in the audiovisual room (or in the staff room) so she can’t leave things lying around from one day to the next. [However], that may improve when we get our new block next year because there are some withdrawal spaces in it.” [Principal, primary school.]

The following passages illustrate the situation in which some schools in the study stated they were increasingly finding themselves: having to quickly react to a situation that was ‘imposed’ upon them, leaving them without adequate time to prepare for meeting the needs of the students and without what they felt were sufficient resources to provide appropriate programmes and support for NESB students and their families.

“In the ESOL area we are really under pressure because of the refugee families. For example, since the beginning of the year fifteen Somali children have been enrolled at this school and they had no English whatsoever. They come into this area clearly because of the housing possibilities [around] here, so they come to this school. But when we talk to the Ministry, the Ministry’s view is that, ‘It’s not our problem’. And not only do the children come but so do their parents and so we run three, or maybe more, adult classes with conversational English. They are almost exclusively families who have PR [permanent resident] status in New Zealand because of refugee situations — Somali, various Asian, Croatian, Iranian. And they arrive here and you are faced with a choice of saying ‘sorry’ or trying to do something.” [Principal, secondary school.]

“[Programmes need to be school-based.] Just as an example, with the Somali children who have come in this term, [their community] obviously got some funding from somewhere to have a programme for all Somali families at [another, nearby school] which is a total waste of time for our school because the children are picked up at 9.00 am and they are deposited back here halfway through lunchtime. So the children aren’t getting any time to socialise or work in an interactive way with the other children in the school [here]. It causes problems, it doesn’t work. We don’t want to see any more programmes like that where our children are withdrawn from the school and thrown into another class that has no relevance to their learning at our school. They need to interact with their peers in their classrooms, rather than be hauled out for three-quarters of the day. It is not giving them a chance to mix with the local children.” [Deputy principal, primary school.]
Concluding Comments

Balancing different needs within the school inevitably involves a school taking into account many factors: the views of the different groups within the school’s community, the amount of backup and support the school receives from its community, the emphases that the school’s community wishes it to pursue (e.g., whether it be a strong emphasis on technology or on sports, music), curriculum changes, the socioeconomic background of the students, teacher recruitment and retention, how well students and others from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds relate to one another within the school, and so on, and so on. The present brief chapter has highlighted just a very few of the factors that participants felt had to be taken into account when balancing the needs of NESB students and those of other students in the school. The factors raised were those of how to successfully devote time to NESB students without jeopardising time spent with other students, how to reassure parents that their children were not ‘missing out’, how to ensure that decisions about the training options that teachers undertake best meet the needs of the school as a whole, how to best use available accommodation within the school to suit the requirements of different groups, and how to accommodate NESB students who arrive without notice when planning and resource allocation for the school term or year have already occurred.