

## Embracing Superdiversity: Pathways to Inclusive Education in New Zealand

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*Diversity is on the rise in Aotearoa New Zealand. This article conducts an updated exploration of New Zealand's educational landscape in light of this cultural richness, emphasizing the importance of tailored policies and initiatives to address disparities and foster intercultural understanding within the context of superdiversity. It highlights the need for broader shifts towards creating inclusive educational environments, while also acknowledging and rectifying historical injustices experienced by Māori, as tangata whenua or people of the land. Integrating intercultural perspectives offers a promising pathway for societal transformation, championing respect, comprehension, and inclusivity across diverse communities in New Zealand and beyond. Although research on cultural responsiveness in New Zealand classrooms is growing, there is a notable gap in studies addressing Pasifika learners' experiences and the impact of Māori-medium education on student success. A stronger foundation in Pasifika pedagogical approaches and Māori education models will further inform New Zealand's transition toward intercultural education. This thorough examination emphasizes the ongoing necessity for concerted efforts to address educational disparities and nurture intercultural understanding in New Zealand's evolving educational landscape.*

**Keywords:** cultural diversity, culturally responsive teaching (CRT), inclusive education, intercultural competence, superdiversity

### Introduction

Educators in New Zealand, like their global counterparts, confront the intricate challenge of navigating cultural diversity within classrooms, especially in the context of globalisation and increasing migration. John Dewey, a prominent figure in educational reform, highlighted trust and respect as essential components of inclusive learning environments (Dewey, 1916). His philosophy, which promotes curiosity, open-mindedness, and reflective inquiry to cultivate democratic societies, is particularly relevant in New Zealand's educational landscape, where educators face the complex issues associated with cultural diversity. Dewey's focus on fostering curiosity is crucial for enhancing cognitive development (Dewey, 1933), providing valuable insights for educators addressing cultural challenges.

Understanding New Zealand's educational framework requires recognising the persistent effects of colonisation, especially in shaping policies regarding Māori education. The Treaty of Waitangi laid the groundwork for bicultural governance; however, systemic

disparities in educational outcomes for Māori students remain (Bishop et al., 2009). Furthermore, New Zealand's unique relationships with Pasifika realm countries, such as Tokelau, Niue, and the Cook Islands, influence migration patterns, cultural expectations, and education policies, necessitating a more nuanced approach to cultural responsiveness that extends beyond mere biculturalism. While targeted initiatives for specific communities, particularly Māori and Pasifika populations, are vital, they are insufficient on their own to effect meaningful policy changes. Addressing the historical injustices faced by Māori communities and advocating for initiatives that foster intercultural understanding across all minority groups is essential. The ongoing disparities experienced by Māori underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions (Eley & Berryman, 2021).

New Zealand's notable ethnic diversity, along with projections indicating rapid growth in less-diverse regions, positions Aotearoa as a 'superdiverse' nation (Cameron & Poot, 2019; ERO, 2023; Spoonley, 2014). However, despite this acknowledgment, there is a scarcity of research focused on culturally responsive practices within New Zealand's superdiverse classrooms (Cardno, 2019; Rigney, 2023). Vertovec (2019) defines superdiversity as the coexistence of numerous nationalities, ethnicities, languages, and religions within a specific locale, reflecting migration's profound impact on societal dynamics. In New Zealand, the challenge lies in finding a balance between 'biculturalism' and superdiversity in educational policies and teacher training (Ritchie & Chan, 2020; Spoonley, 2017). Within the educational context, superdiversity encompasses three key ideas: diversity among children and families, diversity as a social context that shapes development, and diversity as equitable participation (Sadownik, 2023). This aligns with the curriculum's focus on diversity and mutual respect, emphasizing the importance of adapting to empirical contexts during practical implementation.

Culturally responsive pedagogies prioritise the cultural strengths of students and require educators to engage effectively with learners from diverse backgrounds (Rigney, 2023). Emerging over the past two decades in response to the educational challenges faced by marginalized communities, Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) emphasises the importance of leveraging students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to enhance learning. Cowden et al. (2021) define CRT as adapting curriculum content and instructional methods to meet students' cultural needs and preferences, bridging the gap between home experiences and classroom objectives (Lim et al., 2019). Given the contemporary challenges in race relations and global geopolitical dynamics, a systematic commitment to fostering intercultural understanding is increasingly critical. The intercultural framework significantly influences discussions on social cohesion and diversity governance, shaping educational practices in New Zealand (Coulby, 2006). However, research by Howard et al. (2015) indicates that educators may have limited understanding of intercultural education. Future research in inclusive education should prioritize intercultural perspectives to promote dialogue, cross-cultural understanding, and transformative engagement.

In New Zealand's educational landscape, embracing superdiversity is essential. This paradigm shift could empower educators to devise innovative strategies for creating inclusive classrooms that genuinely celebrate diverse identities. Ongoing research aims to position New Zealand as a leader in inclusive education, providing transformative experiences for learners in a superdiverse society. Despite the nation's rich cultural and linguistic diversity,

recent studies reveal a potential gap in integrating intercultural skills across education (East et al., 2022). This gap is underscored by the presence of 160 languages spoken (Statistics New Zealand, (n.d.). East et al. (2022) emphasize the global significance of intercultural skills, particularly for second-language learners. While the challenges posed by cultural diversity in education are widely recognised, there remains a critical need for research exploring how Pasifika learners navigate the New Zealand education system. Additionally, discussions on policy reform and inclusive teaching practices must incorporate studies on Māori-medium education and its long-term outcomes. Addressing these gaps is vital for refining an intercultural approach that authentically serves Aotearoa's unique demographic landscape.

## **Background**

Over the past fifty years, New Zealand has experienced significant demographic shifts, with its population now exceeding five million. This transformation reflects both historical migration patterns and contemporary immigration policies that have reshaped the nation's social and cultural fabric. Traditionally, New Zealand has been framed as a bicultural society, emphasizing the relationship between Māori and the predominantly European Crown under the Treaty of Waitangi. However, with increasing superdiversity, there is a growing recognition of the need for an intercultural framework that acknowledges the complexities of an evolving multicultural society (Spoonley, 2014).

Historically, biculturalism prioritised Māori and Pākehā relations, yet assimilationist policies often marginalised Māori voices, particularly in education. European models dominated schooling, sidelining Māori language and knowledge systems, which resulted in longstanding educational disparities. Although initiatives such as kaupapa Māori schooling and Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2009) have sought to address these inequities, structural challenges persist. Without addressing these fundamental issues, efforts to promote interculturalism risk overlooking the systemic barriers that continue to shape educational outcomes. Migration policy has played a central role in shaping New Zealand's demographic landscape. In the nineteenth century, colonial policies aimed to maintain an Anglo-dominated society, with limited exceptions such as the arrival of Chinese gold miners and Indian workers (Taher, 1970). However, by the late twentieth century, systematic immigration reforms were introduced to expand both population growth and economic development (Salahshour, 2016). The 1987 Immigration Act marked a major shift by dismantling the 'white New Zealand policy,' which had previously favored British immigrants while restricting those from other regions (Kasper, 1990; Spoonley, 2020). These reforms contributed to a sharp rise in permanent residency approvals between 2005 and 2015 (Collins & Bayliss, 2020), ultimately shaping the country's contemporary ethnic composition.

By 2018, New Zealand's population was composed of 70.2% European, 16.5% Māori, 15.1% Asian, 8.1% Pasifika peoples, and 1.5% Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African (MELAA) (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). This increasing diversity, driven by immigration, urbanisation, and an aging population, presents both opportunities and challenges (Alam & Nel, 2022). While urban centers have adapted to these demographic shifts, rural and small-town communities continue to face difficulties in integrating migrant populations and ensuring equitable resource distribution. Aotearoa New Zealand is now among the world's most ethnically diverse nations, with nearly one-fifth of its population—around one million

people—identifying as part of an ethnic minority. By 2033, projections indicate that ethnic communities will make up 25% of the total population, with Māori increasing to 19% and Pasifika peoples to 10%, reinforcing the nation's shifting demographic profile (Ministry for Ethnic Communities, 2023).

This growing superdiversity has far-reaching implications for education, requiring policies that are culturally responsive, inclusive, and equitable. This paper examines how diversity policies have been implemented in New Zealand's education system and assesses the extent to which they effectively address the challenges of a rapidly changing demographic landscape. The evolving perception of national identity—moving towards a polyethnic and multicultural framework—aligns with Smits' (2019) findings, highlighting the urgency of developing an education system that reflects and responds to the complexities of New Zealand's diverse population.

### **Transitioning from Biculturalism to Interculturalism**

New Zealand's educational landscape has historically centered on biculturalism, a framework rooted in the Treaty of Waitangi, designed to address disparities stemming from colonization by primarily recognising the relationship between Māori and Pākehā. However, ongoing migration is reshaping the nation's demographics, leading to tensions in balancing bicultural commitments with the growing need for intercultural approaches. The emergence of superdiversity presents a significant challenge that necessitates the integration of a broader spectrum of cultural identities beyond the traditional binary framework.

Research indicates that educational policies grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi and bicultural principles remain vital for shaping the outcomes of Pasifika and Māori students. For example, the Culturally Responsive Practices Measure (Asil, 2017) reveals a positive correlation between these practices and the enrolment of Māori students in primary schools, though the relationship with academic achievement is complex. In early childhood education, research by Chan and Ritchie (2020a, 2020b) and Ritchie and Chan (2020) underscores a commitment to bicultural and treaty-based principles. Subsequently, building on the Master of Teaching and Learning program's focus on culturally responsive methods, community engagement, and understanding diverse learning needs to effectively prepare educators for New Zealand's diverse student population (Safa, 2025), recent evidence suggests progress in addressing persistent challenges related to migration and curriculum delivery. This improvement aligns with broader research highlighting the empowering impact of culturally responsive practices for Māori communities in teacher education (Ritchie, 2003) and higher education (Glynn & Berryman, 2015; Reilly, 2011), indicating a positive evolution from historical tensions with traditional Western educational frameworks.

The Treaty of Waitangi serves as a cornerstone for educational policies across New Zealand. Ritchie (2003, 2012) underscores the ongoing relevance of treaty obligations in teacher education and early childhood settings. Nonetheless, existing bicultural frameworks have often overlooked migration-related inequalities (Chan & Ritchie, 2020a, 2020b). These findings suggest an urgent need for more comprehensive approaches that honour treaty commitments while addressing the needs of diverse migrant populations. The central question is not whether biculturalism should be replaced, but how it can be expanded to accommodate a superdiverse society while upholding Treaty obligations. This expansion

requires policies that differentiate between the rights of Māori and those of new migrant communities, recognizing their distinct historical and sociopolitical contexts.

As New Zealand's educational landscape evolves, it is transitioning from biculturalism to interculturalism, reflecting broader societal changes. While biculturalism has made significant strides, concerns remain regarding its effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of immigrant communities (Hill, 2010). Initially, biculturalism arose as a response to indigenous dispossession, with the aim of establishing partnerships between Māori and the Crown (Johnson, 2023). However, its success in addressing historical injustices is open to debate. Advocates argue that it enhances relationships and integrates Māori knowledge into education (Saha et al., 2022), while critics view it as a neoliberal construct that fails to ensure genuine indigenous inclusion or recognize *mana motuhake* (Simon, 2023). Research on collaboration between Māori and non-Māori has shown promise in merging diverse worldviews and applying Kaupapa Māori principles within Western frameworks (Rolleston et al., 2021). Nevertheless, challenges persist in fostering authentic partnerships, protecting Indigenous intellectual property, and securing adequate resources for effective collaboration (Saha et al., 2022). The discourse surrounding biculturalism illustrates the complexities of addressing colonial legacies and advancing authentic indigenous autonomy in Aotearoa New Zealand. The shift toward interculturalism signals a growing recognition of the necessity for inclusive practices that embrace the richness of all cultural identities within the educational framework.

Interculturalism is increasingly seen as a more inclusive framework for managing cultural diversity in education, promoting dialogue, interaction, and shared values among individuals from various backgrounds (Peters, 2012). Educators who cultivate intercultural competence create environments characterised by mutual respect and engagement (Savicki, 2023). This competence encompasses a range of skills, including openness to different cultures, self-awareness, empathy, adaptability, mediation, critical evaluation of diverse perspectives, and the conscious application of cultural learning (Sercu et al., 2005). In intercultural education, both students and educators engage with diverse cultural norms and values, fostering inclusivity and open-mindedness (Cushner, 2015; Holm & Ziliacus, 2009). Research indicates that exposure to various cultures, coupled with intentional intercultural learning, significantly enhances intercultural competence (Kharkhurin et al., 2023; Mathews, 2020; Paige & Vande Berg, 2012). This suggests a potential link between embracing cultural diversity and fostering creativity. By emphasising understanding and respect for differences while acknowledging commonalities across cultures, interculturalism enriches cultural awareness and contributes to social cohesion (Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

It is essential to recognise the dynamic nature of cultural interactions, echoing scholarly calls to avoid static portrayals of cultures and to appreciate the central role of individuals in these exchanges (Byram et al., 2023). The transition from biculturalism to interculturalism aligns with a global trend toward embracing cultural diversity in education, recognising the intrinsic value of all cultures and fostering meaningful dialogue across diverse communities. This shift promises to enhance inclusivity and equity within New Zealand's educational framework.

## **Fostering Curiosity in Intercultural New Zealand Schools**

In New Zealand's evolving intercultural education landscape, curiosity stands out as a vital component that drives exploratory behavior and predicts academic success (Dewey, 1910). Traditional schooling has often suppressed curiosity rather than nurturing it (Engel, 2015). This highlights the crucial role of teachers in promoting curiosity through a tailored curriculum and activities that resonate with individual student interests.

At the heart of this educational paradigm is the teacher-student relationship, essential for enhancing engagement, academic achievement, and reducing dropout rates (Barile et al., 2011; Roorda et al., 2011; Suldo et al., 2014). Positive relationships between teachers and students not only benefit students but also enhance teacher well-being and job satisfaction, particularly in light of high attrition rates (Claessens et al., 2016; Gu & Day, 2007; Veldman et al., 2013). Curious individuals naturally seek connection and relationship-building, fostering positive interpersonal dynamics within educational settings (Amorim Neto et al., 2022; Jirout et al., 2018; Renner, 2006). Dewey's (1910) foundational work emphasises the potential benefits of curiosity for academic success, aligning with *The New Zealand Curriculum's* (Ministry of Education, 2007) recognition of curiosity as a core value. Curiosity, characterised by innovation, inquiry, and critical thinking, resonates deeply within New Zealand's educational ethos (Keown et al., 2005). A joint statement from New Zealand's Minister of Science and Innovation and Minister of Education in 2014 underscores the importance of nurturing curiosity to leverage new developments (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2014).

In navigating the superdiverse landscape of New Zealand schools, fostering curiosity is pivotal and closely linked to principles of intercultural education. Recognizing curiosity as a driving force for academic success and societal advancement aligns with the broader vision of New Zealand's educational framework, which aims to cultivate creative, enterprising individuals who contribute to a sustainable future (Ministry of Education, 2007).

## **Intercultural Principles and Diversity in New Zealand Schools**

While intercultural education emphasises belonging, curiosity, and positive teacher-student relationships, these elements are not exclusive to intercultural frameworks. Research consistently shows that strong teacher-student relationships enhance student outcomes across diverse settings (Roorda et al., 2011), and fostering curiosity improves academic achievement and engagement, regardless of cultural background (Engel, 2015). Therefore, these qualities should be viewed as essential components of effective pedagogy rather than confined to intercultural approaches.

The current application of intercultural principles in New Zealand schools presents challenges, particularly in addressing the complexities of superdiversity. While initiatives supporting Māori and Pasifika students are commendable, there is a notable lack of equivalent efforts for other ethnic communities. This gap risks reinforcing disparities and excluding students from non-Māori, non-Pasifika backgrounds who do not see their identities reflected in existing policies and practices (Salahshour, 2021). The urgency of addressing systemic discrimination has been underscored by events such as the Christchurch mosque attacks, which highlighted the need for greater equity in New Zealand schools (Tahana, 2021).



Despite policy initiatives aimed at fostering inclusion, implementation remains inadequate, further marginalising non-Pākehā students and perpetuating historical inequities (Oliveira & Safa, in press; Salahshour & Boamah, 2020).

A key limitation of the current approach to intercultural education is its tendency to privilege certain ethnic groups, limiting broader cultural responsiveness in classrooms. Addressing this requires a more nuanced understanding of diversity, including a deeper exploration of Islam within historical and social contexts (Barton, 2015; Beydoun, 2018; Mirnajafi & Barlow, 2019). The Ministry of Education's *Understanding Muslim Identity in Aotearoa* initiative (Ministry of Education, 2023) seeks to enhance social cohesion. However, Genaro and Safa (in press) identify a lack of Ministry guidance, leaving many educators uncertain about how to navigate sensitive topics. Greater institutional support is needed to ensure inclusive teaching practices. To build genuinely inclusive educational environments, New Zealand schools must move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and implement policies that support all students equitably. Strengthening cultural responsiveness, addressing systemic discrimination, and providing educators with clear guidance will foster a more cohesive and equitable society.

### **Moving Towards Interculturalism: A Path Forward**

Transitioning towards interculturalism presents a compelling opportunity for New Zealand's education sector to effectively navigate the complexities of an increasingly diverse society, particularly within the context of superdiversity. Historically, educational frameworks have predominantly centered on European and Māori cultural narratives. However, broadening this focus to encompass intercultural perspectives promises to yield transformative outcomes across multiple domains of education and community engagement.

Recent studies illustrate the effectiveness of New Zealand's educational programmes in preparing pre-service teachers to engage with diverse student populations. These programmes advocate for an inclusive intercultural approach that not only supports Māori and Pasifika students but also prioritises the needs of all minority communities. By weaving intercultural principles into academic curricula, educational standards can be elevated, fostering inclusive social environments that recognise and celebrate the diverse experiences of students within a superdiverse landscape. International research further corroborates the success of systematic pedagogic interventions within cohesive curricula, which cultivate intercultural attitudes and enhance race relations, extending their influence beyond the confines of school settings.

Achieving meaningful transformation necessitates a multifaceted strategy. Leadership emerges as a pivotal factor in cultivating culturally responsive schools; effective school leaders establish the foundational tone for inclusivity and systemic reform. Continuous professional learning opportunities are crucial for equipping educators with the skills needed to engage effectively with superdiverse classrooms. Additionally, active parental and community involvement not only strengthens intercultural initiatives but also ensures that diverse perspectives are integrated into educational policies. There is an imperative to embed robust research and evaluation mechanisms within policy implementation frameworks to monitor progress and uphold accountability in the pursuit of educational equity.

To transcend mere rhetoric, New Zealand must commit to comprehensive structural reforms that bolster interculturalism while honoring its bicultural obligations. This commitment entails investing in leadership development, aligning professional learning with cultural competencies, and fostering genuine partnerships with diverse communities. Such a shift towards an inclusive, evidence-driven education system will not only address existing disparities but also position New Zealand as a leader in navigating the complexities of superdiversity in education.

## **Conclusion**

This examination of New Zealand's educational landscape underscores the urgent need for tailored policies and initiatives that address enduring disparities while fostering intercultural understanding amidst the backdrop of superdiversity. While targeted efforts towards specific communities, such as Māori and Pasifika, remain essential, a more expansive shift in approach is critical to establishing inclusive educational environments for all in the face of increasing diversity. Recognising and addressing the historical injustices faced by indigenous Māori communities is vital, necessitating sustained interventions to mitigate socioeconomic disparities and educational inequities. Advocating for intercultural initiatives that benefit all minority communities complements the prioritisation of Māori and Pasifika, enriching educational discourse and promoting societal cohesion within superdiverse urban contexts.

Intercultural education plays a pivotal role in shaping the educational landscape; however, recent studies indicate a significant gap in comprehensive understanding among New Zealand's educators regarding its principles and best practices. Prioritising intercultural perspectives in inclusive education research is essential for facilitating dialogue and understanding across diverse cultures, which is crucial for developing innovative strategies within inclusive classrooms. Despite notable progress, the integration of intercultural skills remains a challenge across educational settings. Achieving transformative change demands effective policy implementation, adequate resources, and enabling strategies that nurture positive racial attitudes and foster inclusive social environments.

New Zealand's embrace of intercultural paradigms signifies a substantive step forward in addressing contemporary challenges related to race relations and global dynamics, underscoring the necessity for a systematic commitment to intercultural understanding. As the demographics of New Zealand's schools evolve towards greater superdiversity, the imperative for heightened intercultural comprehension becomes increasingly evident. Education stands as a vital instrument in nurturing social cohesion and inclusivity.

In summary, embracing intercultural perspectives within the framework of superdiversity, alongside fostering curiosity and respect, holds the potential to drive meaningful societal change. This approach not only enriches the educational experience but also cultivates a spirit of understanding and inclusivity across diverse communities within New Zealand and beyond, paving the way for a more equitable and harmonious future.



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