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“Not ethnic, but ethics groups”: Friendship group formation at a Melbourne high school¹

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Teachers and students at Australian high schools often remark that student friendship groups tend to divide along ethnic lines. Yet ethnographic studies on this topic indicate that the relationship between ethnicity and friendship group composition is much more complex than this characterisation implies, and that the degree to which group members see ethnicity as influencing group formation may also vary from situation to situation. In this paper I will explore the ongoing relevance of ethnicity to friendship group formation at one highly multiethnic Melbourne high school. While students expressed a variety of opinions about the relevance of ethnicity to their friendship group formation, this paper will contend that the key factor shaping friendship group formation at the school was not so much students' ethnic background, as their general attitudes and orientations towards maintaining (or not maintaining) their heritage language and culture. In exploring these issues in detail this paper adds to our understanding of the ongoing relevance (or lack thereof) of ethnic heritage in the lives of second generation teenagers and the social dynamics of our multiethnic schools.

Ethnicity and friendship in schools

Within the popular imagination, co-ethnic friendship groups in schools are often viewed as an alarming sign that multicultural policies have failed to bring about integration and instead have led to separation and alienation (cf Bolt 2004). This concern is further heightened by the often quick step between noticing ethnically-based peer groups and criminalising such groups as “ethnic gangs” out to menace law-abiding Anglo-Australians (cf. Collins et al 2000, Bolt 2004). At the other end of the spectrum, it is argued that it is only natural that students who share a common language, culture and heritage should find it easier to relate to each other than people from different backgrounds, and thus far from being alarming, co-ethnic friendship groups be accepted as a normal part of the migrant adaptation process. While the argument taken in this paper has much more in common with the latter of these two viewpoints, it cautions that both are oversimplifications of what are often very complex processes.

Studies of student friendship groups in schools have long shown that even when groups seem to divide quite clearly on ethnic lines other factors – such as gender, interests or sexual orientation – can play an important role in determining who is included and who excluded from the group (Walker 1988, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 1999, Noble et al 1999). As such, even quite stridently ethnic peer groups generally have one of two

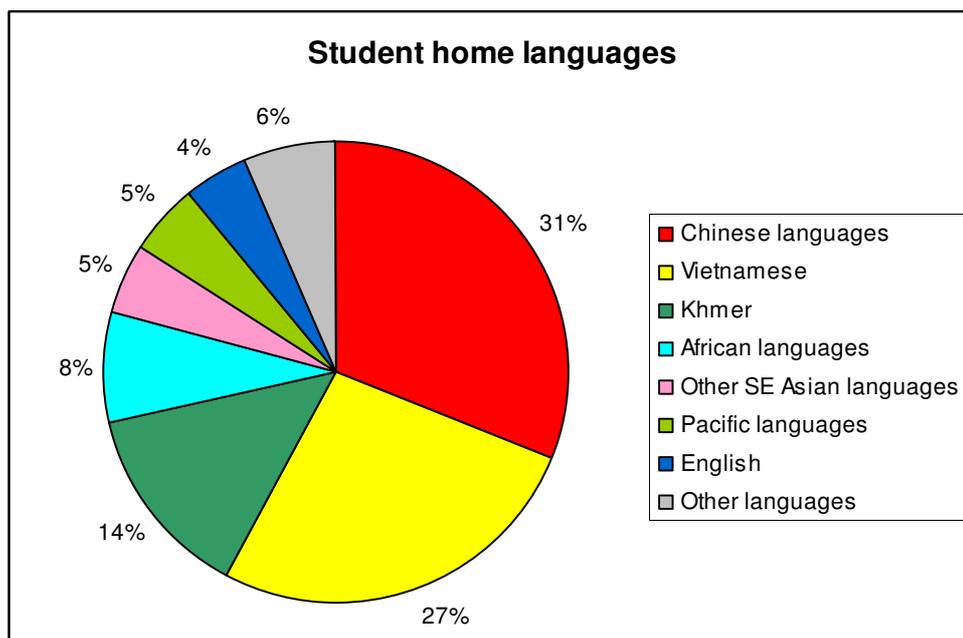
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members who are not of the “correct” ethnicity, but have enough in common with group members in other areas to be happily accepted as one of the group. This point raises the important question of to what degree common background really is the glue that holds co-ethnic friendship groups together, and to what degree they might better be seen as a meeting of like minded people, who happen to share the same background. As Noble et al (1999) document, there is often some debate within the group themselves on the role of ethnicity in cementing their friendship. In that case group members largely agreed that their common Lebanese background made it easier to befriend each other, but identified different aspects of their shared language, culture and attitudes as contributing to this fact. We thus see that co-ethnic friendship groups are perhaps better characterised as alliances of people who share a similar past, rather than rigid groupings with clear criteria determining who is and is not allowed membership. Moreover, like all alliances, internal differences (such as those of religion or the importance laid on preserving the ethnic culture in Australia) are downplayed in some circumstances and exaggerated in others, creating opportunities for the number and type of people included in the group to be greatly expanded or contracted.

While it might be presumed that students would feel the greatest sense of solidarity with others from own their ethnic group and a lesser affiliation with other from neighbouring ethnic groups, recent research from the US questions this assumption. It finds that members of the second generation feel they have much more in common with other second generation students from similar (but not identical) backgrounds than they do with first generation students who share their heritage (Espiritu 1992, Olsen 1997, Daoud 2003). Consequently, second generation students tend to form so-called pan-ethnic groups based on a sense of common regional culture and experience adjusting to life in the host society and largely refuse to associate with “fresh off the boat” migrants, whose lack of familiarity with American norms of behaviour is often characterised as deeply embarrassing. Such findings not only highlight the hidden complexity behind such statements as “all the Asians hang out together” but suggest that similarity of attitudes towards language and cultural maintenance/ hybridisation play a more important role in friendship group formation than one’s precise ethnic background, a point that will be expanded upon in the rest of this paper.

Context of the Study

Ferndale Secondary College is a small but ethnically diverse high school in one of Melbourne’s traditional migrant reception suburbs. Students come from around 40 different ethnolinguistic backgrounds, and over 90% speak a language other than English (LOTE) at home. As Chart 1 demonstrate Chinese, Vietnamese and Khmer speaking students account for over 70% of the school population, while other languages are spoken by much smaller groups:



This article draws on ethnographic observation and interviews conducted with 25 students in Years 10-12 in 2004 as part of a wider project exploring the relationship between language maintenance, friendship groups and identity affiliations among adolescents of migrant background (see Willoughby 2006). Twenty of the students were either born in Australia or have lived here for at least five years, four were international students from China who had been in Australia for between one and three years², and one was a Sudanese refugee who arrived in Australia 2 ½ years before the study commenced. Together, they represent a cross-section of peer groups in the senior school and have very varied views on the relevance of ethnicity to their social group formation at school.

The great ethnic divide? Sudanese, Chinese international and local students

When asked if any students from certain ethnic background tended to stick together at school, Ferndale students invariably mentioned the Sudanese and Chinese international students. Yet students had quite different opinions on why this cleave occurred, only some of which were broadly related to ethnic differences.

Since the Sudanese, Chinese and established local student groups were known for using Arabic, Mandarin and English as their respective lingua francas, it is unsurprising that language proficiency was frequently invoked as the best explanation for the evolution of the three groups. At its most simplistic, this argument states that Sudanese and Chinese international students' poor English skills leave them completely incapable of striking

² In 2004 there were approximately 50 Chinese international students at the school, almost all of whom were in Years 11 and 12.

up friendships with English speakers, and thus they have no choice but to form first language groups. Local students often invoked this argument in order to justify why they made little effort to socialise with Chinese international or Sudanese students, however it is a somewhat glib response given that most (if not all) of these students were passing their senior high school subjects in English and had attained a level of communicative competence where they could joke and make small talk with myself and their teachers.

A more sophisticated argument based on language proficiency contended that Chinese international and Sudanese students were capable of communicating in English, but “just more confident with their own language”. Literature on ESL education has consistently noted the joy and sense of relief ESL students often feel when they have the chance to socialise with others in their first language; no longer needing to plan every utterance or withhold their thoughts because they cannot express them properly in English (Miller 2003). In this sense, first language peer groups perform an important support function, not least because they allow students to participate fully in conversations rather than feeling marginalised because they cannot fully understand the nuances of conversations in English. As several Chinese international students noted in the interviews, it would also seem strange (and perhaps even rude) to speak to one’s compatriots in English knowing full well that both parties are more proficient in at least one Chinese language (cf. Goldstein 2003).

While sharing a common language was seen as instrumental to Sudanese and Chinese international student peer group formation, similarities in culture and circumstances (and difference to those of established local students) also played an important role. In the following extract Mark, a local student of mixed Vietnamese-Anglo background, discusses how he sees different norms of behaviour contributing to the separation between international and local students at school:

Extract 1

Mark: Surprisingly I’d say [the internationals are] in their own group, well not actually surprisingly because here we’ve maintained our own culture if you like, it’s sort of like ethics –not ethnic but *ethics* groups – we have different morals and different ways of communicating. Like here if we go out to get lunch we’ll bring our lunch, which is sort of like wrapped up, whereas these guys [the international students] will fight like vultures to get into that microwave [in the VCE centre] to heat up their rice [laughs]. So they hang out in their own group and we hang back and we watch them and we don’t want to offend them by jumping in and taking the microwave and we have to be careful because these are these groups we don’t exactly understand them so it’s slightly like having xenophobia.

Shared interaction norms and cultural knowledge provide a key social lubricant that helps Chinese international and Sudanese students feel a special sense of affinity with

their compatriots, and promotes a sense of difference from the somewhat Australianised peer culture of the established students' groups. Sudanese and Chinese international students at Ferndale both find themselves in quite different circumstances to the average local student, which can also promote a sense of ethnic solidarity even though the causes of these differences in circumstances have little (if anything) to do with ethnicity. Thus, for the Chinese international students, the status as temporary residents living in Australia without their parents means that they face a number of problems of cultural adjustment and homesickness that more established local students cannot relate to. Similarly, the Sudanese students are almost always placed in year levels with students 2-4 year younger than them (the result of heavily interrupted schooling during the war and their years in refugee camps) and often have unique difficulties adjusting to formal education, developing literacy skills and dealing with the traumas of war (Cf. Miller et al 2005). Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand why these students felt drawn to their compatriots, and also why language/ tribal differences within the Chinese international and Sudanese³ peer groups tend to be swept aside in a common feeling of ethnic solidarity and difference from their more established peers.

Ethnicity and established student peer groups

Since Ferndale is an extremely diverse school, where students come from at least 40 different ethnic backgrounds, it is unsurprising that none of the established student peer groups analysed as part of this study were ethnically homogenous. As Table 1 demonstrates around half of them were made up exclusively of students from an Asian background, however, since around 75% of students at the school are of Asian background it is entirely plausible that these all-Asian peer groups have arisen by chance.

Table 1: Established students' peer groups

Year 12 2004	Ethnicity of group members
Abrihet's group Four girls, all year 12s	Eritrean, El Salvadorian, Cambodian, Chinese-Cambodian
Than's group Core group of four boys in larger group of eight, all year 12s	Burmese, Anglo, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Sudanese
Mark's group Two boys, three girls, mixed year levels	Vietnamese-Anglo, Bosnian, Anglo, Vietnamese
Putrea's group	Chinese-Cambodian, Vietnamese

³ All Chinese and Sudanese students studying at the school spoke at least some Mandarin and Arabic respectively, however since China and Sudan are highly multilingual countries students had a variety of first languages including Cantonese, Wu, Hakka, Dinka and Nuer.

Five girls, all year 12s	
Year 11 2004	
“The princesses” Three girls, all year 11s	Vietnamese, Cambodian
“The boys” Five boys, all year 11s	Filipino, Vietnamese, Cook Islander Maori, Lebanese
Year 10 2004	
Cathy’s group Five girls, all year 10s	Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian
Lan’s group Four girls, all year 10s	Vietnamese, Burmese
Nina’s group Two girls best friends, larger group of seven girls, all year 10s	El Salvadorian, Afghani, Samoan, Vietnamese, Chinese, Anglo-Australian
Trung’s group Group of five to ten year 10 and 9 boys	Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese

Participants expressed a variety of views on the salience of ethnicity to their peer group formation. In the following extract the most popular girls in Year 11 debate the degree to which sharing an Asian background contributes to Asian students befriending each other:

Extract 2

Louisa: What do you think would be some of the crowds or the ways people divide themselves up here [at Ferndale]?

Katrina: I think it kinda happens automatically, you just click with some people.

Nhung: Yeah you just click.

Katrina: I dunno there’s [trails off]

Nary: What? Well I think that what I see is that people um most of them are good friends with their own nationalities and that. So um even though some are mixed but mostly it’s one main nationality. And as well there’s like interests, coz there’s the sport groups and the art people group stuff. So it depends what they’re like.

- Louisa: Do you think that the nationalities that there are any patterns that people from this background also hang round with people from that background?
- Katrina: I think its just pretty much Asians hang around each other. I dunno, coz it's not always the case, but usually you get the Asians hanging together.
- Nhung: Yeah it happens more so in big schools you have you're Asians together and you have your Euros and then uh I dunno [trails off]
- Louisa: What sort of things are people finding in common that Asian people hang out together - is it a values thing?
- Katrina: I think it's the way you were brought up.
- Nary: Yeah the culture is similar so we can just understand each other better I suppose with cultures and what you do.
- Nhung: And it's like it's more like, you have "oh what are you doing Chinese New Year" or "how much of your pocket money did you get" and y'know you have things that there are more things that you can talk about.

While the girls initially see friendship groups in terms of "just clicking" with some people, they quickly move to seeing background as just as important (if not more so) than common interests, such as art or sport. Although they are keen to hedge their comments, they clearly feel that similarities in cultures and upbringing make it easier for them to befriend other Asian students. Later in the interview, it emerged that arguments with parents about acceptable behaviour in Australia (particularly as regards socialising outside of school, having boyfriends and academic achievement) were seen as a key point of commonality between Asians, with Katrina remarking:

Extract 3

- Katrina: I reckon with all Asian parents the lectures are the same [agreement from others] I can go to Nhung "oh yeah your parents probably said that that and that" and she'll be like "yep"
- Nhung: yep

Katrina, Nary and Nhung (and also the participants Robert and Mei-Yee), clearly see "Asian" students as united by a common attempt to craft a standard of behaviour that acknowledges their parents' more traditional values but ultimately embraces many of the rights, freedoms and notions of gender equality typical of mainstream Australian youth culture. Yet of course not all Asian students share the girls' view on the best way to balance competing cultural elements. Putrea, Lan and Van provide contrasting examples of participants who crafted an "Asian" peer culture where chastity and working towards exceptional academic achievement were integral group values and members were not expected to socialise with each other outside of school (except in the context of family gatherings). In each of these cases, it is clear that similar attitudes towards language and cultural maintenance, modernisation and hybridisation is at least as important in bringing group members together as their common Asian background.

This point is brought home by Putrea in explaining why she is friends with a large group of Vietnamese friends who share her traditional values (such as not dating and only socialising with her family outside of school), but had dropped out of touch with friends who share her Chinese/Cambodian background but have become too “modern” for her tastes:

Extract 4

Putrea: I used to have friends who are Chinese, Khmer and stuff too, but then like she’s more modern and she goes out and she watch movies and she goes on holidays and stuff like that. And you can’t make friends if I and her are different. You wouldn’t have common stuff. So it’s not fun staying together.

Looking at peer groups in terms of their attitudes towards language and cultural maintenance, modernisation and hybridisation not only allows us to gain insight into the ways in which members see their backgrounds as still relevant to their daily lives and interpersonal relationships, but also allows us to consider whether those students who claim that ethnicity is irrelevant to their friendship group are actually clustering together in peer groups that embrace mainstream Australian norms. There is some evidence that this is occurring at Ferndale, with the five participants who claimed ethnicity or common culture were irrelevant when selecting their friends all emerging from the wider study showing a lower than average interest in language and cultural maintenance (see Willoughby 2006), and having peer groups at school that were strongly orientated towards Australian youth culture.

In closing this section, it should be noted that as much as many participants value their friendships with others from similar backgrounds, no participant appeared closed to the idea of befriending people from different backgrounds. In fact, many stressed that while it was nice to have friends from a similar background, friendships with others were not strikingly different and were thus not that much harder to sustain. Thus Nina remarked

Extract 6

Nina: “With [school friends from other backgrounds] it’s something different coz I can’t really say do you go to church, coz like they’re normally Buddhist or something like that. But it doesn’t change, y’know like I can still be friends with them, I can still talk and do things, it doesn’t really change anything.”

Nina, Richard, Mei-Yee, Abrihet and Nohemi give particularly clear examples of students who talked in the interviews about preferring co-ethnic friends while at the same time having highly diverse friendship groups at school. However, all students reported that they have at least one or two friends (either at school or in the general community) who shared their interests, but not their ethnic background. Thus we can

contend that while students might be drawn to people from similar backgrounds who share their attitudes towards language and cultural maintenance/hybridization, this attraction is at the level of tendency rather than hard-and-fast rule about who they are willing to be friend.

Conclusion

This analysis of the Ferndale social environment provides several important lessons for policy makers and educators. While teachers at Australian schools are often concerned about recent migrants forming first language peer groups (seeing them as limiting migrant students' engagement with the school community and opportunities to practice their English, Miller 2003), this paper has shown that first language peer groups are to some degree to be expected, and can play a valuable role in helping students understand their academic work and adjust to life in Australia. Recent migrants should certainly be encouraged to join in school activities and have a go, but teachers should realise that first language groups serve a number of important functions and should value them accordingly.

The discussion has also highlighted the role of attitudes towards language and cultural maintenance and hybridisation rather than ethnicity per se, in shaping students' peer groups. In line with US research, we see that at Ferndale Asian students form peer groups not based on country of origin, but on the role ethnicity continues to play in their daily life: with some choosing peer groups that strongly maintain traditional customs and values, others seeking to balance competing Asian and Australian norms and a third contingent forming multiethnic, highly Australianised groups. In helping raise awareness of the often large differences in attitudes and interest of students from similar ethnic backgrounds this article will hopefully lessen the degree students from these backgrounds are stereotyped as being all alike and may also help teachers identify other sub-cultural orientations (such as "stoners" or "nerds") that have been previously invisible elements of certain ethnically based peer cultures

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