



My Friends Were There for Me: Exploring the Pedagogical Adaptations of Secondary Nigerian-Australian Students in Tasmania

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Abstract

This article explores the experiences of migrant Nigerian secondary students and their observations of teaching and learning within the Tasmanian context. These students and their families had migrated from Nigeria to Australia and their parents were skilled migrants serving as professionals in different fields (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2011). Australia's skilled migration program encourages professionals from various countries to seek employment opportunities where there are shortages. A particular focus of this article is the way in which students from these families have adapted to the pedagogical context of secondary schooling in Tasmania. In interviews, the students were encouraged to reflect on their prior schooling in Nigeria and to compare their experiences in Nigeria with their current schooling in Tasmania. A qualitative methodology was employed utilising semi-structured interviews and an analysis of written responses via a journaling exercise. The results suggest that three areas of adaptation (the social, the academic and the cultural) were important to the students' successful school experiences in Tasmania. The active role that the students played in their successful adaptation was also identified. Some recommendations for teachers, based on the literature and the findings of the project, are offered.

Background

Migration is an age-old phenomenon and people move around the world for different reasons (Manning, 2013; Marsella & Ring, 2003). Relocating to a new country presents many challenges for migrants. These challenges all involve integration into the new culture and responding to the demands of change. Hall's (1974) 'iceberg' model of culture (as cited in Hanley, 1999; Lambert & Myers, 1994) suggests that there are multiple layers of culture that affect adjustment to that culture. Challenges may be heightened for a student whose initial learning experiences took place in a different country with differing cultural norms, teaching styles and expectations, and this may impact upon the student's learning.

It can be argued that, due to the growing multicultural nature of Australian society, and indeed the classroom, it is necessary to ensure that all students are adequately catered for in order to engage with and enhance their learning (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014; Ashman, 2012; Department of Immigration and Border Protection [DIBP], 2011; Habgood, 2012). DomNwachukwu (2010) offers two views of teacher approaches to their roles: that of assimilator or that of accommodator. Teachers who adopt the role of assimilator believe that culturally diverse students need to shed their ethnic backgrounds and adopt the new country's culture. DomNwachukwu argues that such an attitude indicates a lack of respect for the students' cultural identities and creates feelings of rejection and low self-esteem among migrant students. Teachers who adopt the role of accommodator make room and necessary adjustments for the non-mainstream students.

Darder and Miron (2006) call for teachers to embrace the role of "cultural workers tasked with the cultural and social transformation of schools and society" (p. 17). Habgood (2012) encourages the 'accommodator' role and argues that teachers in a multicultural society should promote equality and "ensure that all students are given the opportunity to succeed" (p. 36). This highlights the significance of taking into consideration the specific cultural background of each student and accommodating this within teaching practices in order to adequately cater for individual learning needs. Oikonomidou (2011) suggests that catering for diversity commences with an understanding of the history of the migrant student's country and a consideration of their specific cultural background in order to fully appreciate where the student is coming from and how to accommodate and meet their learning needs.

This article explores the experiences of Nigerian migrant students in adjusting to learning pedagogies in Tasmanian secondary schools. The

Nigerian students interviewed in this study migrated to Australia with their parents. Their parents had come to Australia as skilled migrants, with many of them working as professionals in various fields. It also explores students' observations of teaching practices in their immediate schooling context. Pedagogical adaptation refers to the process by which students adapt to pedagogical contexts and strategies (Marsh, 2010). It could be said that in all teaching and learning situations there is an element of adaptation on the part of the learner as they encounter new ways of developing understandings. In the context of this research project, pedagogical adaptation refers to the ways in which the subject students have adapted to ways of teaching and learning in the Tasmanian schooling context.

Exploring pedagogical approaches is significant, as approaches may be different in the differing contexts and could benefit or impede the promotion and enhancement of learning (Bitew & Ferguson, 2012; Bitew, Ferguson & Dixon, 2008). This article prioritises the 'student voice' and links to the relevant literature to support the discussion.

Research question and research design

This article reports on the research question, '*How do Nigerian migrant secondary school students adapt to pedagogical practices in Tasmanian schools?*' A qualitative phenomenological and case study approach was adopted, with semi-structured interviews and written responses to exercises designed by the researcher utilised as the main data collection tools. The aim was to understand the lived experiences of Nigerian migrant secondary students in adjusting to the learning environment of the Tasmanian secondary school.

A small sample size allowed for the collection of rich, deep and meaningful data. Following an initial open invitation, seven Nigerian migrant secondary school students—four female and three male students—participated in the study. These students had all experienced primary school years in Nigeria before immigrating to Australia with their families. Their experiences of two different schooling systems allowed for pedagogical comparisons. The students involved in this study were aged between 14 and 18 years.

The data collection was structured to occur in three phases, utilising two interview sessions and a journal writing phase. One of the three researchers undertook the role of interviewer (Lois Kidmas originated from Nigeria and has an in-depth knowledge of the Nigerian schooling system so was well suited for this purpose), and established rapport with the interviewees, thus

encouraging the participants to feel relaxed and comfortable and willing to share information.

The semi-structured interview allowed for a degree of flexibility that enabled the interviewer to modify the questions in the course of the interview as necessary. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device along with written notes. Individual interviews were conducted using open-ended questions in order to provide opportunities to delve into the inner world of the interviewee and gain a deeper understanding of their views and perspectives. Each of the interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour per session.

Following the initial interview, participants were requested to write a journal of their experiences of schooling in Nigeria over a two-week period. These journal-writing exercises enabled the students to express/represent their experiences in an alternative mode. A second interview, comparable to the initial interview, was then conducted to provide further supporting evidence which was then discussed.¹

Findings

Based on the collected data, significant themes were identified when answering the above research question. Three overarching themes, *social*, *academic* and *cultural*, as described in the Table 1 below, were identified, based on both the students' responses to the interview questions and analysis of their written material. Subthemes emerged demonstrating the interrelationships between the students' academic, cultural and social experiences, which highlighted similarities and differences in these experiences.

Social

One of the key themes identified was the importance of social interaction in both the students' Nigerian school experiences and their pedagogical adaptation to schooling in Tasmania. From the overarching social theme, subthemes of friendships, sport and after-school activities emerged. The value of positive peer relationships is understood to have a protective function in transitions (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Smokowskia, Reynolds, & Bezruczkoa, 1999) and the responses from the students

¹ For this research to be carried out, an ethics application was completed and approved by Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. The Ethics approval number is H0013930.

indicated that they recognised multiple opportunities to develop relationships with their classmates as being important.

Protective factors identified by the students tended to have a social aspect and included supportive family environments (all students) and supportive schooling environments (all students). The investigation of psychological protective factors was beyond the scope of this study, but could be an area worthy of further investigation.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes for pedagogical adaptation

Social	Academic	Cultural
The role of friendship	Preferred learning styles	Communication
Sports and extracurricular activities	Teaching approaches	-verbal
	Classroom dynamics	-non verbal
	Nature of work/curriculum	
	Resources	

The Role of Friendship

Friendship was identified by all seven students as a key factor enabling them to adjust to their schooling environments in Nigeria and Tasmania. Their voices captured the value of friendship:

My friends were there for me. - Female, Age 14

Although I was shy, I was smart in the science subjects and some of the students will ask for my help and then we became friends that way. -Male, Age 15

I was used to a more social environment in Nigeria where I could just go to my friend's house or they could come to mine.
- Female, Age 14

We lived in the same neighbourhood and our parents were friends. We got to meet to study and play together.
- Male, Age 16

The students described initial difficulties making new friends when beginning their education in Tasmania. Difficulty making friends impacted negatively on their experiences, with some students mentioning that they felt quite lonely and isolated. However, they also reported that learning became more enjoyable as, over time, they began to make friends.

All seven students interviewed found making friends to be more difficult in their new schooling environment in Tasmania when compared to their previous experiences in Nigeria. They all attributed this to the initial challenge of not knowing other students. One of the students expressed this challenge by saying:

I found it hard to make friends because, after school, I don't even see those students, everyone kept to themselves.

- Male, Age 14

The respondents found that initiatives made by other students to talk to them and invite them to join their groups, for example playing team sports within and outside school such as Australian Football League (AFL), basketball and soccer helped them to adjust and make friends.

When probed further as to whether they did anything to make their adjustments easier, some highlighted how they had to be friendlier and be the ones to initiate a conversation in order to get to know the other students. For example:

I tried to speak like them (with an Aussie accent) to fit in.

- Male, Age 14

I had to be more outgoing. - Male, Age 16

From these responses it can be seen that establishing friendships was important to these students in both their Nigerian and Tasmanian schooling contexts. The students found it less stressful to make friends in their Nigerian schooling environment than they did in the Tasmanian environment. The students attributed this to their familiarity with some of their classmates and the after-school interactions they had with them in Nigeria. It was evident that developing friendships within the Tasmanian schooling environment was more stressful and students had to take a more active role. They felt more settled only after they had established some form of friendship.

Hamm and Faircloth (2005) attest to the role of friendships in affecting adolescents' sense of belonging in school. They suggest that positive

outcomes occur when students feel included and develop friendships and that there can be negative outcomes when students feel alienated and find it hard to establish friendships. Positive benefits can include peer assistance with schoolwork, as students seem to understand each other better. The social and emotional wellbeing of students is also developed as a sense of companionship develops. Riggs and Due (2010) confirm such findings based on research on newly-arrived humanitarian migrant students in primary schools in South Australia. Further, Sanagavarapu's (2010) research on Bangladeshi students' transitions to schools in Sydney identified that friendships play a major role in enabling students to settle quickly within their new school environments. These findings are consistent with those of Irwin (2013) and Towns (2011) following their study of the effects of friendships on the academic endeavours and social behaviours of adolescent boys, and the transitions of primary students to secondary schools, respectively. Friendships form a vital role in enabling students to settle in their school environments irrespective of where they might come from. Oliver (2012), in a study of African high school students from refugee backgrounds, identified friendship as playing a role in students' resilience and school engagement.

Sports and Extracurricular Activities

Sports and extracurricular activities were highlighted by five out of the seven students and are considered to be of significant importance in developing friendships and maintaining social interactions. Relevant student comments include:

I like it most when we had friendly sports competitions after school. - Female, Age 14

*I was part of the soccer team and we played against other teams within the school and outside our school.
- Male, Age 15*

The significance of extracurricular activities in enhancing students' sense of belonging and personal identity has been highlighted in the literature (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). Students who are able to develop friendships have a more positive attitude towards being at school (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999). Further, the literature indicates that students' academic achievement is also enhanced through such extracurricular activities (Holland & Andre, 1987;

Marsh, 1992). The students' responses within this research and the findings of other studies emphasise the value of structured out-of-class activities in enabling students to form relationships in a less formal and more 'natural' way. Oliver (2012) reported that participation and engagement in extracurricular activities was more difficult for students from refugee and multicultural backgrounds. Whilst sporting and other extracurricular activities were available to the local students, and it is assumed that they provided similar benefits to other students, it is suggested here that these activities were seen as opportunities for the Nigerian students to develop social connections with their peers.

Academic

The second theme identified from the gathered data relates to academic matters. Within this broad theme are the subthemes of students' preferred learning styles, teaching approaches, classroom dynamics, and the nature of the work and curriculum and resources.

Students' Preferred Learning Styles

In response to the question, "What were the teaching and learning styles that engaged you the most?" students provided the following responses:

I like it when teachers give you an explanation that you can relate with, something at our level. - Male, Age 15

I like it when I can listen to the teacher and write my own notes. - Male, Age 16

*When learning is fun, practical and hands on.
- Female, Age 14*

When I am learning together in small groups with students with similar working capacities. - Female, Age 14

Research supports the notion that accounting for students' preferred learning styles is of paramount importance if students are to be engaged, committed and take ownership of their learning (Allen, Humphries, McBurney, & Makushev, 2005; Sloane, 2010). Although students might demonstrate strong preferences for one style, many possess and may use more than one styles. The responses of the students noted above indicate diversity in their preferred styles of learning. An important consideration

for teachers may be to prepare to accommodate a wide range of learning styles when planning for students from differing cultural contexts, including those learning styles developed as a result of ‘teacher-centred’ learning approaches. This is especially important as the learning methods and the types of learning styles used in many African nations are often different from those used in the Australian schooling system. The Nigerian system tends to focus on ‘traditional’ or teacher-centred approaches in which the teacher delivers content directly to the students and assessment tasks are based on testing and exams (Cassity & Gwo, 2005; Oliver, 2012). Some students indicated that whilst they enjoyed the opportunity to learn via a learner-centred approach, they would have perhaps benefitted from some familiar learning experiences, such as individual rather than group work.

Teaching Approaches

Teaching strategies may vary depending on the schooling context. A hallmark of contemporary Australian education is the use of teaching approaches that provide opportunities for students to access learning through different pedagogical methods, as outlined in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011). This diversity in approach is due to the way in which individual teachers select methodologies to suit their class, individual students and the subject area.

In response to a question requesting reflections on their teachers back in Nigeria, the students revealed both positive and negative attributes about the teaching styles displayed by their Nigerian teachers. The positive responses provided by students included:

Some could teach well, some were funny and made jokes in their class. A few were patient and tolerant. - Male, Age 16

Some encouraged students to do their best. - Female, Age 15

I liked it when teachers were nice. - Female, Age 14

They were forceful but still helpful. - Male, Age 14

Some teachers are friendly—when they are in a good mood—our form teacher was the friendliest. - Female, Age 15

Students highlighted the following as some negative attributes displayed by their Nigerian teachers:

They were no nonsense teachers...some were too serious and not friendly. I was afraid to ask them questions when I needed help. - Male, Age 15

They were very strict...I think they took education very seriously and they thought discipline was very important especially in schools and they were not lenient in anyway. - Female, Age 16

I remember they were always strict. - Male, Age 14

It was intimidating to ask them for help sometimes. - Male, Age 16

Students identified the following approaches to teaching in Nigeria:

Most times we worked on textbooks ... the teacher will stand in front of the board and write and we were asked to copy notes. - Male, Age 15

Some teachers expected you to answer their questions and when you can't they whip you. I sometimes had to respond just to avoid getting flogged. - Female, Age 15

Corporal punishment is still practised in Nigeria with the principal or head teacher permitted to inflict such punishment as a form of discipline (Tyessi, 2014). Corporal punishment was banned in both government and non-government schools in 1999 in Tasmania.

The students described the teaching approaches they experienced in Nigeria as reliant on the teacher as the main source of knowledge, with students as the recipients of such knowledge. It can be deduced that, through these approaches, students were expected to remember what the teachers said and be ready to answer questions.

Students also responded to the same question in relation to their Tasmanian teachers. They all thought the teachers were approachable and helpful. One student commented that:

It was easy to adjust to the way the teachers taught because they were teaching in a more relaxed way. - Female, Age 16

All the students thought that most of their Tasmanian teachers explained what they were teaching well, giving simpler explanations and examples and making it easier to develop understanding. The students highlighted beneficial teacher approaches as, for example:

The teacher asked me to share about my country...to locate Nigeria on the map and to say something in my language. It was a good way for me to share about my country and for the students to understand where I was coming from... I felt a part of the class. It was funny how the teacher tried to pronounce some words in my language. - Male, Age 16

The pedagogical approach utilised demonstrates that the teacher was sensitive to the student's background and valued the student's prior experiences. Riggs and Due (2010) argue for pedagogical approaches that move away from attitudes of pity or benevolence towards migrant students to approaches that recognise the individual capacities of these students and appreciate their experiences and prior knowledge. In this case, the teacher positioned the student in a place of power, making this student the more 'knowledgeable other' or peer (Vygotsky, 1978)², and thus used their experiences as a learning tool.

The students also commented on how they appreciated the varying teaching approaches of their Tasmanian teachers.

I like it when you get to read, write notes but also do relevant activities. I like the freedom for students to make their own choices. Teachers allow us express ourselves and be more confident. - Female, Age 16

Classroom Dynamics

The nature of the classroom setup was among the questions explored in the interviews for this study. The students shared information about their

² The concept of 'knowledgeable other' is drawn from the concept of sociocultural teaching practices, originating with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of 'scaffolding' as a way in which learners are supported with incremental assistance from a 'more knowledgeable other', or peer, whilst undertaking a task

classroom environments in both Nigeria and Tasmania. Their responses revealed that classrooms in Nigeria were large, with about 40 students in a class. The seating arrangements were predominantly in rows and columns facing towards the blackboard.

In Tasmania, the students experienced a different, smaller classroom environment, with an average of about 20 students. Seating arrangements varied from small table groups to opportunities for all students to gather for whole-class discussions.

Few peer-to-peer interactions occurred within the students' Nigerian classrooms unless they were individually organised amongst peers. This accords with previous findings regarding teacher-centred approaches to teaching in Nigeria (Apanpa & Oluranti, 2012; Nwosu, 2014), which found that collaborative learning strategies were not utilised within many of the classrooms, with more reliance placed on expository teaching methods (Akinbobola, 2010).

As indicated above, this was not the case in the Tasmanian schooling environment, where the classroom setup was such that it encouraged peer interaction. For instance, all of the students commented that they worked together in small table groups, were assigned group tasks and shared ideas.

The findings of this study are supported by Victory and Cohen (2014), who suggested that the way the classroom is arranged affects the interactions that occur in the classroom and also affects the process of learning and teaching. The students recognised that the way in which classrooms were arranged in their Tasmanian context was quite different from most of their Nigerian classroom experiences. They found that they took some time to adapt to the new class settings. An implication for teachers is to view the adjustment process to a new classroom setting as occurring over time and to allow students time for pedagogical adaptation to occur.

Nature of Work, Curriculum and Classroom Assessment

The students revealed that in Nigeria they studied various subjects, averaging about 10 in primary school, 13 in junior secondary school and 17 in senior secondary school. The students explained that they had three school terms per year in Nigeria and described undertaking three written assessment tests followed by an end-of-term exam. Students also had to sit an end-of-year written examination covering content across the three terms. Their success in these examinations determined their promotion to the next class, otherwise they would have to repeat the class they were in.

The students explained that they found engaging with the work in their Tasmanian classrooms easier. Some of the students mentioned that the learning experiences were the easiest aspect to adjust to. When probed further as to why this was the case, the following is an example of the responses provided:

*I enjoyed the work because of the way the teachers taught.
It was easy to adjust to the way the teachers were teaching...
they were teaching in a relaxed way. - Female, Age 15*

All participants reported their academic work within their Tasmanian classroom to be significantly different to that in Nigeria. One student highlighted that the work was not challenging enough initially, so the teacher made adjustments in order to provide this student with more stimulating and challenging work.

The assessment strategies utilised within the two contexts differed, with students highlighting the use of more *summative assessments* within their Nigerian classroom context and *formative assessment* strategies in their Tasmania classroom context. While in Nigeria, they mentioned how they disliked the use of exams as the main means of gauging their understanding. When probed further, they attributed this to the tension and stress it caused as they needed to remember a whole term's work for end-of-term exams and three terms' work for the end-of-year exams. The reality of test anxiety and its potentially negative effects on performance has been noted in the literature (see Ogundokun, 2011). In comparison, in their Tasmanian classrooms the students did not undertake end-of-term or end-of-year examinations except for the Australian *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) exams which occurred every other year. The NAPLAN tests were conducted only in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 for the purpose of tracking student progress in comparison to school and national averages. The tests are also meant to assist teachers to develop their curriculum to meet national standards.

Resources

In relation to resources available within their schooling environments in Nigeria, some of the students made comments such as:

*We had poor schooling facilities. There was no internet.
- Male, Age 14*

In discussing the availability of resources within their Tasmanian schooling environment, all the students made comments such as:

We have access to all the resources, such as computers, we need to help us learn. - Female, Age 14

Teachers brought in the resources we needed for our experiments. - Male, Age 16

The availability of basic classroom resources is generally thought to foster student engagement and the enhancement of learning (Hardman, Abd-Kadir, & Smith, 2008). How these resources are utilised may have a significant impact on students' engagement and outcomes. Within the Tasmanian schooling context, students revealed that resources were readily available and this assisted in making learning more engaging and enjoyable.

Within the Nigerian classroom context, resources were scarce and were found to be inadequate to cater for the large number of students within the classroom (Hardman, Abd-Kadir, & Smith, 2008). Okebukola (2012), in her research into the views of 30 Nigerian primary school teachers on teaching literacy, also identified variability in the availability of classroom resources. She found many classrooms lacked resources such as flashcards, charts and textbooks and offered only limited access to computers, the internet and a library in urban schools, with no access in rural schools. All the teachers identified a lack of adequate resources as being a hindrance to their ability to teach students effectively. This supports the statements made by the students interviewed for this research, who commented on how inadequate resources affected their engagement, enjoyment and ease of learning. However, these students did not reveal any direct relationship between the availability of resources and their academic achievement. Despite the challenge of inadequate resources within their Nigerian schooling contexts, the students indicated that they were capable of achieving success at a high level in their learning in Nigeria. The students' capacity to succeed without the provision of the range of resources thought necessary in the Australian context indicates that the students utilised more than physical resources to enhance their learning.

Apart from the physical or external resources that are available within the learning environment, students and teachers bring to the classroom internal resources such as problem-solving skills and resilience (Woolfolk & Margetts, 2007). The students interviewed demonstrated resilience, problem-solving abilities, hard work and the motivation to excel.

Cultural

The definition of culture is broad and complex. Emmitt, Komesaroff, & Pollock (2006) define culture as “a way of life, as the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools that characterise a given group of people in a given period of time” (p. 50). As a contested construct, the material, ideological and linguistic elements of culture are not fixed. Rather, they are dynamic and, in some sense, highly subjective. One model of culture is the ‘iceberg’ model (Hall, 1974, cited in Hanley, 1999) which identifies those easily recognised elements (food, festivals, dress) as ‘above the water-line’ and those less tangible features of culture (attitudes towards gender and age, beliefs about the after-life, for example) as the unseen aspects of culture ‘below the water-line’. The working definition utilised in the present study is that culture is a ‘process’ rather than a ‘product’. In this sense, culture and language are connected in complex ways as we strive to construct shared understandings.

Academic and social elements (as discussed above) are also part of the general culture students have had to adjust to. Other cultural elements, such as a difference in the way food is prepared, were also mentioned by the students as differences they found easier to adapt to. One noticeable way that the students experienced the connection between culture and language was in the way in which non-verbal communication differed between Nigeria and Tasmania. The experiences of these students with both verbal and non-verbal communication is considered below.

Communication

The link between language and culture is thought to be complex, dynamic and ongoing. It is also an important consideration for teachers who have diverse classrooms (Emmitt, Komesaroff, & Pollock, 2006). Pedagogical adaptation, as a holistic construct, includes adaptation to the language used in the classroom as well as the cultural and social meanings developed via the language used in the school environment. The students mentioned that both verbal and non-verbal communication played a role in their pedagogical adaptation, and this subtheme is divided into these two categories accordingly.

Verbal Communication

Although language has been identified as the biggest challenge the majority of migrant students encounter (Bitew, Ferguson, & Dixon, 2008; Chapman, Zilwa, Evans, & McDonald, 2001; Cranitch, 2010; Dyson, 2008), this was not the case for the students in this study. The students’

responses suggest that language was not the immediate challenge to their adjustment as they all spoke and wrote in English in their classrooms in Nigeria. This is an interesting point to consider in light of the current research on issues for migrant students. The seeming assumption that students from multilingual environments may struggle with English as the language of instruction may, perhaps, not quite reflect the lived experience of students who have had initial schooling in countries where English is considered one of the official languages, such as Nigeria.

The spread of English throughout colonised areas of the world has been diagrammatically represented in the 'World Englishes' graphic developed by Kachru (1992). Kachru places countries where English is the majority official language, such as Australia, within an 'Inner Circle'. In an 'Outer Circle' are countries such as India, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, where English is an official language and is often used as the language of instruction in primary and high schools. It is possible that Nigeria's status as an 'Outer Circle' country may not be well known by Australian teachers of Nigerian migrant students, thus the assumption may be made that language issues will be a barrier to learning for students arriving from Nigeria.

One of the issues identified as an obstacle, however, was the difference in accent and intonation encountered in the unique Australian context. The students highlighted how their friends and classmates found it difficult to understand their accent when they spoke and how they, too, struggled to understand their Australian peers.

Non-Verbal Communication

One of the students highlighted the difficulty in adjusting to the expectations of her Tasmanian teachers in terms of non-verbal communication. She had this to say:

Teachers here expected me to look them in the eye when talking to them but coming from Nigeria, that was a sign of disrespect. I have learned to look teachers in the eye because they think it is rude not to. - Female, Age 16

Teacher expectations have a significant effect on students' learning experiences (Intxausti, Etxeberria, & Joaristi, 2014). Such expectations need to be clearly explained to students as they may differ from what students are used to in their previous schooling experiences and in their homes (Chinner, 2014; Victory & Cohen, 2014). For example, as indicated

in the above comment, in Nigeria it is considered rude for students/children to maintain eye contact when talking with authority figures.

The role that non-verbal communication plays in communication is heightened in the classroom context, as the teacher-student relationship is negotiated over time and influenced by cultural context, gender and age. The differences between the Nigerian students' understanding of particular non-verbal cues and their teachers' is a small, but initially important, example of the value of understanding the way in which culture, language and context interact. It is also an example of the way in which the students are able to 'work out' the non-verbal behaviours appropriate in the new context and highlights the general capacity of the students to try a range of strategies in order to adapt to the complexities of the new schooling context.

Conclusion

The comments of these seven Nigerian migrant students indicated that social, academic and cultural elements - in particular, friendships, extracurricular activities/sports, teaching approaches, students' preferred learning styles, classroom dynamics, the nature of the work, and verbal and non-verbal communication - affected their adaptation and adjustment to their new learning environments. The findings strongly suggest that the success of the adaptation of the students involved in the study is linked to their willingness to look for, and activate, ways to overcome any potential challenges to their adaptation. An example is the way in the students made a conscious effort to be socially outgoing and approachable in order to develop friendships with their peers or to seek opportunities to play sport or engage in extracurricular activities.

An implication for Tasmanian teachers, and indeed other teachers, is to consider the benefit of providing a range of opportunities for students to find ways to develop social relationships through semi-structured sport and extracurricular activities and to support Nigerian migrant students' willingness to develop individual and creative responses to adaptation. The prior experience of a more traditional or 'teacher-directed' learning context in Nigeria meant that some students initially found the 'learner-centred' approach of Tasmanian classrooms an area for adjustment. The students reported that the emphasis on peer-to-peer teaching was beneficial, but a suggestion is for the provision of some traditional teaching to aid in the Nigerian students' transition to a new learning context. These could provide opportunities for students to work individually while still encouraging them to work collaboratively in small groups.

Aspects of language, especially accent and slang, and varying expectations in teacher-student communication, were potential barriers to communication. However, it is worth noting that the Nigerian students used problem solving to overcome these challenges, from focussing on their listening skills and pronunciation to making concerted efforts to overcome their hesitancy in returning eye contact with their teachers.

Overall, students had a positive experience settling into the Tasmanian schooling environment and found the teaching style and teacher-student interaction in Tasmania beneficial. Of particular note is the way the students developed adaptations to potential challenges through targeted problem solving. Their insights are a valuable contribution to understanding the process of pedagogical adaptation faced by students who transition from one schooling system to another and also reaffirm the value of understanding each student as an individual learner who is negotiating a new, and sometimes complex, educational environment.

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