Article

How Can We Better Understand and Support International Students at Australian Schools? A Case Study of Chinese Learners

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Abstract: Despite the rapid increase in international students in the education sector, this area remains an under-researched. In Australia, many schools welcome international learners, but are also aware that the support they can offer cannot fully address the student's needs. Drawing on surveys ($n = 51$) and focus group interviews ($n = 16$), this case study considers how Chinese international students at four Australian schools understand their everyday experiences. The findings show that students learn and socialise in ways that make sense to them, based on their observations and interpretations of everyday events. Although the support from the school, teachers, and local peers were appreciated, they did not completely solve students' problems, nor were they necessarily interpreted and accepted by our participants as intended. It is important for educators to develop a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by international students in everyday life, and the kind of support that the students need.

Keywords: international students; Confucian Heritage Culture learner; school education; cultural differences

1. Introduction

There has been a steady increase in school-aged international students around the world [1–3]. In Australia, the number nearly doubled from 13,000 in 1994 to 25,500 in 2019 [4]. It has become common for schools in both the public and private sectors to have a number of international students enrolled in mainstream programmes. While celebrating the success of the internationalisation of western education systems, some researchers have identified further challenges faced by these secondary students. First, as English L2 speakers with limited prior knowledge of Australian schooling, students need to quickly enhance their language proficiency, and adopt new academic norms and practices; moreover, as sojourners they often need to negotiate between home and host cultures, which can be different or at odds with each other.

Many schools' administrators and teachers are eager to better support these students, but are not yet equipped with sufficient knowledge about how to meet their needs [3,5]. Though secondary students share similar problems with their university peers, e.g., struggles with class participation, foreign language anxieties, and difficulties in making local friends [3,6,7], strategies for the latter do not necessarily suit the former, as there are differences in maturity levels, academic needs, surrounding environments, etc. Therefore, to better understand and support this growing student group, more school-based studies should be conducted. Research set in a school environment also makes a useful contribution to the field dominated by studies of tertiary international students, as it allows us to examine similar issues within a different context.

In the tertiary education sector, educators have long advocated for intercultural interactions and mutual learning [8,9]. Yet, when it comes to academic collaboration, co-national

associations are preferred by both local and international students [10,11]. Although cultural events and partnership programmes are organised to nourish cross-cultural friendships [12–14], students seldom reach out to peers from a different language and cultural background [10,15,16]. Among many factors, the 'freedom' of university life, i.e., students plan their own studies, social activities, and work, has limited the opportunities for those in different existing circles to establish stable relationships and shared experiences [17–19]. In comparison, local and international students stay closer and participate in similar activities, which provides researchers with more comprehensive understandings about both the success and failures of mutual learning and cross-cultural friendships.

Hoping to enrich knowledge held by researchers and practitioners regarding international students at school while preventing overgeneralisation, this study focuses on secondary students from China, who form the largest international student group in nearly all popular host countries [4,20]. As part of a larger project investigating the internationalisation of Australian secondary education, this paper looks at how Chinese secondary students understand the challenges and the forms of support they have encountered. It is hoped that their accounts could help us gain insight into their actual experiences, and develop more effective strategies for these learners with diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

2. Literature Review

2.1. CHC Learner in Western Countries

Watkins and Biggs (1996) coined the term 'Chinese learner', referring to Chinese students influenced by Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC). In CHC countries such as China, Japan, and Vietnam, core education values include moral striving, effort-based attitudes and action plans, respect for knowledge, and humility [21,22]. Through parental attitudes and training at home and at school, these values exert a pervasive influence on cognitive socialisation in (a) the definition of teacher–student relationships, (b) attitudes towards learning, and (c) cognitive aspects of personality functioning [23].

For instance, CHC societies often share the belief that knowledge is handed down by authority figures such as teachers [24], and therefore students should listen to their teachers attentively and respectfully [25]. Meanwhile, learning virtues such as diligence, endurance of hardship, and steadfast perseverance are believed to be crucial for success [26], and thus memorisation and repetition are seen to be a natural part of learning. Whereas Western education tends to value a speculative and questioning approach, the Chinese system, which places more emphasis on the conservation and reproduction of knowledge [27], prefers respectful listening over robust dialogue, and harmony over questioning.

At first glance, some CHC values and practices are different from mainstream Western education principles, which prioritise self-directed learning and high-level learning skills, such as analysis and evaluation [25]. As identified by Grimshaw [28], earlier research has sometimes labelled the CHC model as a 'deficit' approach, and CHC learners as passive, rote learners who lack critical thinking and independent learning skills. However, these concepts might stem from misperceptions of CHC [29]. For example, CHC students who use memorisation are not simply rote learners, as they memorise with understanding. Not contradicting their teachers does not mean that they accept everything taught without critical reflection, and basic skills such as remembering are valued with importance, since they form a basis which enables effective high-level learning.

Nowadays, educators tend to be more open-minded towards CHC approaches to learning [30,31]. However, in an academic community where open communication is associated with being actively engaged, Chinese students who do not speak up in class discussions or during group work may still be misunderstood as passive and disengaged by teachers and peers [32,33].

2.2. Communication Difficulties

Research shows that Chinese students face a range of communication-related problems when they study overseas [34–36]. Frequently identified issues include struggles to participate in class discussions [35,37], the experience of foreign language anxiety [38], and difficulty in making local friends [39,40].

English is taught in China as a foreign language (EFL), the use of which seldom goes beyond the classroom. Although the vocabulary size of a well-educated English first language (L1) speaker is 20,000 word-families, and one only needs to know the most frequent 3000 word-families for adequate comprehension of general English texts, it is not uncommon for EFL speakers to have a vocabulary size of around 1000 word-families [41,42]. There is also a fluency gap between EFL and L1 speakers, as the latter process English with a high degree of automaticity (i.e., to automatically choose words, pronounce them, and put them together appropriately) whereas the former need to make great cognitive efforts [43]. With such significant gaps, it inevitable that Chinese students will experience communication and comprehension difficulties when studying and living in an English L1 context. Academically, written assignments, class discussions, and oral presentations could be daunting to those with relatively low English proficiency [44,45]. Socially, many want to make local friends but find conversations with L1 speakers a tiring process, and a major source of anxiety [16,38].

Despite a strong desire to make new friends and to explore new cultures [46,47], not many Chinese students are able to establish cross-cultural friendships when they study overseas [39]. Besides the language barriers mentioned above, cultural differences are also identified by students as a significant barrier [48,49]. The lack of intercultural experiences and cultural knowledge makes interactions with people from a different background intimidating [49,50]. When conversations take place they tend to be superficial, due to the lack of common interests and a high level of uncertainty [40]. Eventually, it is common for Chinese students to fall back into co-national networks for social and psychological support [15,51,52].

2.3. Cultural Novices

In addition to the differences between CHC and Western learning cultures, and the proficiency gap between English L1 and L2 speakers, the challenges identified above are also partly caused by Chinese students' lack of cultural knowledge. Chiu and Hong [53] define "culture" as a network of loosely organised and shared knowledge, that provides its members with standard operating procedures, unstated assumptions, norms, and values. Although a monolithic nation-based culture does not exist, there are nonetheless differences between two countries when it comes to education [26,54] and everyday life [15]. As a result, Chinese students are likely to experience an information gap that spans many areas, including unfamiliarity with the education system and academic standards, and the lack of local cultural knowledge in communication [9].

To study and live in a new environment, they need to establish cultural knowledge shared by its members. Yet, it can be hard for them to retrieve enough information in a short period, since standard procedures and norms are often taken for granted in a community, and are therefore not always discussed in detail. Many Chinese students hold a positive attitude towards practices such as peer collaboration and group discussion [47]; however, confusion over the requirements of course materials, and uncertainties over how and when to respond in an interactive classroom, often make actual participation very difficult [44,45]. Moreover, with a limited understanding of local events and cultural references, students also find it hard to comprehend content based on local examples, especially when proper explanations are not provided [55].

This lack of cultural knowledge also hinders communication with local peers. Due to uncertainties over appropriate social practices and insufficient knowledge about popular culture, many Chinese students want their local peers to make the first move [50]. Yet, locals are often preoccupied with existing friendship circles, and are not motivated or

aware of the need to take such initiatives [36]. Eventually, many Chinese students are disappointed by locals, who seem to have little interest in making contact, whereas local students develop an impression that Chinese students always stick together, speaking their language.

2.4. Missed Opportunities

Even though studies often focus on the problems students encounter, their achievements and growth should not be underestimated. Gu [34] and Heng [50], for instance, identify that the large majority of Chinese students are able to cope with the new learning context over time, and perform well academically. Not everyone is able to make multicultural friendships, but at the end of the journey they are proud of their personal growth, e.g., a higher level of personal independence, broadened life experiences and personal interests, and improved interpersonal and communication skills.

Nonetheless, researchers and teachers are sometimes concerned with the coping strategies used by the students, especially their reliance on co-national networks [36,39,40]. Many Chinese students go overseas for better educational experiences, chances to improve their English, and a competitive degree [45,46]. Upon their arrival, shared backgrounds, academic challenges, and difficulties of breaking into local circles often bring them together. The co-national network might help them to 'survive' Western education, and acquire a good certification, but it also shields them from a more immersive experience of studying abroad [5]. More specifically, while the 'enclave' they form can protect students from campus stereotypes and provide social, academic, and spiritual support, it can also limit their chances of improving their English-language skills, interacting with members of the host society, and developing a broader view of academic success and the future [15].

Being aware of the challenges faced by Chinese students, or more broadly speaking, international students, and the need to better engage them into a wider community, educators have begun to develop support programmes. The English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) is used to prepare international students for learning in mainstream classrooms. Meanwhile, different partnership programmes are offered by universities to enhance regular interactions and collaborations between student groups. Eisenchlas and Trevaskes [12] design a 6-week communication programme for Chinese and Australian students, with the aim of creating a comfortable and non-threatening 'cultural space', from where they can reflect on their own and other's cultures. Students were paired for a weekly 80-min discussion, with a focus on everyday cultural practices and behaviours at university. The discussion was based on scenarios of everyday encounters and guided by a worksheet with a series of questions. Similar programmes are conducted by Chamberlin-Quinlisk [56], Gresham and Clayton [13], and Campbell [57], ranging from 12 weeks to 8 months (in which case students meet monthly). Some programmes have brought together the international–local partnership and the development of intercultural communication competence [58,59] The two aspects feed into each other, resulting in better intercultural communication experiences when students learn to use knowledge and skills they have acquired in class to facilitate actual interactions. However, due to the lack of follow-up studies, it is often unclear if the knowledge and experiences they have gained from a certain programme can be used to effectively address the challenges faced in other in-class/out-of-class scenarios.

In other words, although measures have been taken to support students, we know little about how effective they are in terms of helping students grasp opportunities they might have missed. Building upon previous research, this study looks at how Chinese students understand challenges and support in Australian schools. In addition to perceived challenges, students are also invited to share their opinions about the effectiveness of relevant types of supports, as it is important to know if what we believe to be useful can meet their needs. The research question for this study is:

How do Chinese students deal with the differences between Chinese and Australian education, the English proficiency gap, and relationships with local peers?

3. Research Methods

This study is part of a larger project, investigating the internationalisation of Australian secondary schools, which collected survey and focus group data from school leaders, teachers, international and local students from a number of public and independent schools. By applying a convergent mixed-method approach, which involved a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data [59], this paper draws on 51 questionnaires and four focus group interviews (*n* = 16). In 2019, we conducted an online survey with students at a weekend Chinese language school. A total of 236 primary and secondary students completed the survey, who were either international Chinese students or Australian permanent residents/citizens from a Chinese background. For the purpose of this study, data of 51 participants were retrieved. They were Year 7 to 12 students, who completed primary education in China and were studying at either public or independent Australian secondary schools in 2019. All of them had been in Australia for five years or less at the time of data collection, and had experience in both Chinese and Australian schooling. Among the 51 survey participants (15 male, 35 female), 22 had been in Australia for 1–2 years, and 29 for 3–5 years. Among the 16 focus group participants (6 male, 10 female), 9 had been in Australia for 1–2 years, and 7 for 3–5 years.

Guided by existing literature, this survey comprised 21 close-ended questions in the forms of multiple choice and a 5-point Likert Scale. Divided into 6 parts, it measured: (1) demographic information; (2) previous learning experiences; (3) perception of learning differences; (4) teachers' understandings and support; (5) interactions with other students at school; and (6) the school's support programmes. The survey was presented to students in both Chinese and English, and the results were analysed using descriptive statistics.

In parallel with the survey, a total of 10 focus group interviews with different student groups at four independent schools were conducted. Guided by an interview protocol, the focus group interview questions were aligned with those in the questionnaire. The interviewers identified them as researchers who spoke both Chinese and English, and the participants were encouraged to use the language they preferred. In the end, three groups were conducted in Chinese and one in English. Focus group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, then sent to each participant for checking. After that, transcripts were anonymised and analysed by thematic analysis [60]. Among them, the data of four Chinese international student groups from the four independent schools were used for this study (two groups of five participants and two with three).

Guided by the research question, transcripts were first coded according to terms such as 'Chinese learning experience', 'Australian learning experience', 'language support', 'academic support', etc. Repeated patterns were then combined until several main themes were identified. Comparing data and previous literature, the findings and discussion are presented in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussion

In general, the participants (survey and focus groups) reported positive experiences at Australian secondary schools. Many quickly noticed the differences between Chinese and Australian classrooms. Most of them appreciated a relatively equal teacher–student relationship, and opportunities to express their views. For instance, Jenny (female, two years in Australia) felt that in Australia, 'students and teachers are like friends', and Wan (female, one year in Australia) realised that 'in China, we would not dare to express different views in front of teachers, but here they encourage discussion and want you to argue with them.'

In class, they interacted frequently with local students. Among the survey participants, 25 (49%) indicated that they worked with locals most of the time or always, and another 17 (33.3%) did so about half of the time. Working with non-Chinese students could be challenging, due to the language gap and different methods of learning, which was particularly true for those in Australia for the first or second year. However, most of them gradually learned to navigate through these barriers, and found their partners cooperative

and open to new ideas. Reflecting on the experiences, 33 (nearly 65%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned from non-Chinese peers.

Most survey participants received support from schools and teachers. The three most common types of support were academic, language and cultural supports, whereas student advisors and religious supports were also available (Figure 1). In the following sections, we present the students' experiences of school life with regard to the challenges they faced and the academic, language and cultural supports they gained.
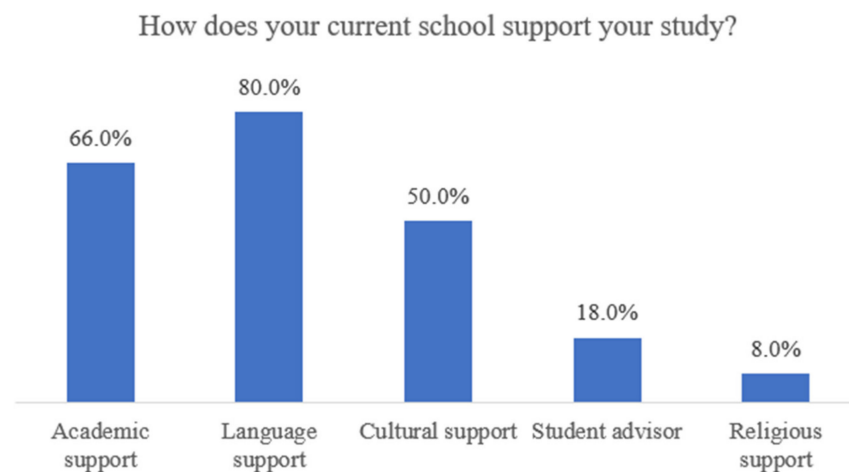
Figure 1. School supports (*n* = 50).

### 4.1. Education Differences: Understanding and Supporting Chinese Students as CHC Learners

Only 8 (15.6%) survey participants found there was no difference between how they learnt in China and in Australia, whereas 25 (49%) agreed or strongly agreed that their previously acquired way of learning was important. Some learning strategies developed in China applied to the Australian context. Lisa (female, three years in Australia) said,

> *I apply my previous learning experience for English, like I can recite some paragraphs or sentences or have some work banks in my memory to keep building my vocabulary . . . In China we always have little notes that with some good words and good sentences you can use in your essays. That applies in English pretty well.*

Some students had internalized certain Chinese practices, and therefore stuck with them, even though their local peers behaved differently. For instance, being quiet and taking notes was considered as a sign of attentiveness and an effective way of learning in China. Our participants often interpreted the lack of notetaking in the Australian classroom as 'students not working hard'.

In Australian schools, they were often exposed to unfamiliar learning materials and methods. Among the 51 survey participants, only 18 (35.3%) reported that teachers would use familiar materials and methods over half of the time (Figure 2).

Some students welcomed the changes. For instance, Andrew (male, two years in Australia) found that, 'while in China we have to memorise a lot of maths and science formula here they are all given in the exam. Here they focus more on application than remembering.' However, rather than going completely 'Chinese' or 'Australian', some would reflect on both and identify the strengths of each. The latter was considered as 'emphasising on understanding and less repetitive', whereas the former was 'formulated but able to cover more advanced topics'. Several mentioned that a combination of the two would be the most effective way of learning.
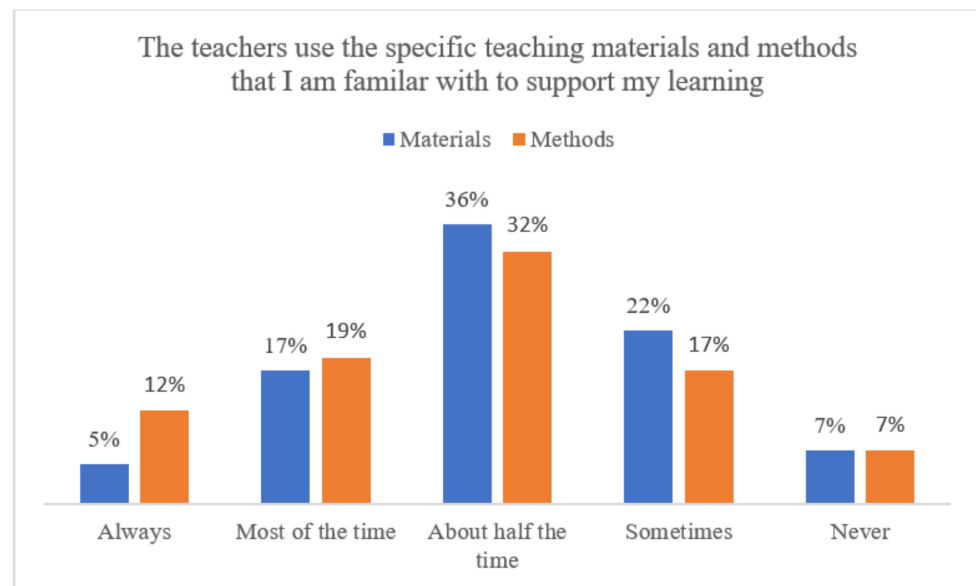
Figure 2. Teaching materials and methods (*n* = 51).

Another significant difference between the two systems is that learning in China is teacher-directed, whereas in Australia it is more student-directed. In China, there is little room for students to plan for and manage their learning, besides paying attention to teachers in class and doing the homework assigned to them every day. In Australia, learners often work on their own, and they might be given a week to complete an assignment with several parts, where the teachers would not constantly check on their progress. It becomes their responsibility to control their learning.

Students appreciated the 'freedom' but also felt disoriented; some encountered time management issues, others were surprised that teachers only talked about an assignment once, then students needed to "chase" them for more details and advice. Even the learning processes were affected. For instance, mathematics teachers in China often bring to class many sample problems with a gradually increasing level of complexity. The sample questions work as a scaffolding tool for students to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content. In Australia, without this scaffolding process, it is difficult for some students to grasp the required knowledge. As Jamie (male, 3 years in Australia) said, 'if I haven't learned that before and the teacher only goes through a few examples, I might not understand very well and need to study it again back home.'

Chinese students also found that the teacher–student relationship in Australia was different. They, in general, preferred the current relationship, which was more equal and less exam-oriented. For instance, Lauren (female, one year in Australia) mentioned that,

> In Australian teachers' eyes you are always a very talented person. People who do not do well academically could excel in many other ways. And they really remember what you are good at, which means a lot to me.

However, some students understood teachers' less academic-oriented responses as 'they don't care' or 'it doesn't matter to them what outcomes you get'. Some felt they had to rely on self-learning, because teachers neither treated teaching seriously nor paid enough attention to students, since 'the teachers often chat with students in class when they teach you don't learn much from them as well'.

In China, a teacher is often regarded as the authority in the field [24] who is 'a model of authoritative learning, expert knowledge and skills, and moral behaviour'. Although the Chinese classroom is teacher-centred, it is also 'student-engaged', as teachers craft the teaching process with sophistication, orchestrate student involvement, and deploy variation to obtain meaningful understanding [31,54]. Although our participants appreciated the equal and casual relationship with teachers in Australia, some seemed to have

internalised the belief that teachers should be the one taking control, rather than a facilitator. They can misinterpret some Australian teaching approaches, and how teachers react to academic imperfection.

Most participants held positive attitude towards Western/Australian practices, probably because the Chinese have long been critical of their own education system, which is seen as rigid and exam-oriented [38]. However, it seems that our participants were aware that the CHC model is not a 'deficit', and basic skills are necessary for effective high-level learning [25,54,61]. For instance, many realised that although Chinese schooling was rather intense and stressful, it allowed them to be ahead of their Australian peers and made their adjustments easier. Memorisation, as Chris (male, three years in Australia) said, this can be a useful learning tool, as 'to memorise a poem or a classic masterpiece might be tiring at that moment, but two years, five years or even ten years later you would still be able to recite it and use it. This memory allows you to develop a better understanding of the piece over time.'

Researchers, teachers, and students do not necessarily understand differences between Chinese and Western education in the same way, and eventually it will be the students' interpretations that will shape their learning the most. Although evidence of what they know and how they think about Australian practices may help schools to better support students, so far it is not common for teachers and students to explicitly talk about learning differences, and to compare different strategies, norms, and values.

4.2. English Proficiency: Understanding and Supporting Chinese Students as English Learners

The participants were motivated to improve their English and were aware of the various types of support offered by their school and teachers. Newly arrived Chinese students often attended English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS). In the mainstream classroom, some teachers would provide them with extra notes, vocabulary sheets, and videos with Chinese subtitles to help them overcome language barriers. These supports were appreciated, but sometimes led to uncertainty.

For instance, ELICOS are considered by schools as useful programmes to smooth the transition of non-English speaking students' to English-medium education, but they are not always welcomed by students themselves. Many did not see clearly how the course would benefit their future learning, and believed they should progress into the mainstream classroom sooner, since it provides them with the language environment which pushes them to practise and use English. In contrast, in ELICOS most classmates were Chinese, and this resulted in speaking Chinese all of the time.

Students pointed out that they had encountered two types of teachers, those who showed awareness, empathy, and were willing to help, like the specialist mathematics teacher for one student, Andrew (two years in Australia). This teacher 'is aware that we might not understand some vocabulary, so he always checks with us like which words we know and which he should explain in class'. The other type of teacher believed it was the students' responsibility to overcome language barriers, 'since you are here your English should be good, otherwise you do not work hard enough'. Supports offered by the first type of teacher, as well as their gestures of caring and their engagement, were important to the Chinese students.

Paradoxically, they also wanted to be 'treated the same as other [local students]', the meaning of which is two-fold. First, some believed that they would be pushed to work harder on their English when no support was offered. Second, probably more importantly, they did not want to be underestimated due to stereotypical impressions of their ability. They seemed to be annoyed by 'a low expectation of our English' when teachers repeatedly explained a word that they already knew, or when local students were amazed by a simple English sentence they had said. Jamie (male, three years in Australia) recounted rather poignantly that, once, senior local students has performed a basic English game with them, and 'we all finished in no time, which really surprised them, like they were very surprised . . . their expectations might be even lower than the teachers.'

Aligned with the literature [47,62], they believed that one effective means to enhance their proficiency was to be immersed in an English-speaking environment. However, their need as a language learner sometimes conflicted with the need to be seen as a competent member of the community. Such conflict makes students anxious, and hesitant to interact with L1 speakers. Moreover, the perceived biases from the locals further reduce their willingness to communicate [52,62]. Although ELICOS and other classroom practices such as the provision of extra materials/explanations addresses Chinese students' need for language supports from a linguistic aspect, they do not necessarily facilitate the formation of psychological resilience against communication-related stresses, or equip students with the knowledge and skills for negotiation between potentially conflicting identities. It is, therefore, important for educators to be aware of students' own understandings, experiences, and concerns, and modify their programmes/practices accordingly.

4.3. Local Friendship: Understanding and Supporting Chinese Students as Cultural Novices

Although the participants, in general, enjoyed studying at Australian secondary schools, they also faced challenges caused by uncertainties over local practices and cultural knowledge.

In terms of how students learn, 22 participants (43.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that there were differences between how they learn and how local Australian students learn; 8 (15.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, whereas the remaining 21 (41.2%) seemed to be uncertain. In focus group interviews, nearly all participants considered there were differences between how Chinese and Australian students learn, but they often found it difficult to articulate what these differences meant.

For instance, many noticed that while they were taking notes in class, local students would often chat with each other, or do something on their own. Yet, it remained unclear for Chinese students if this was how Australian students were supposed to learn, or if their local peers were simply 'not working hard'. Similarly, they were also aware that Australian students asked a lot of questions in class, used different tools (e.g., a mind-map) for revision, and did assignments in groups, but were unsure how these would benefit their learning.

The Chinese students tended to adhere to methods of learning they were familiar with, until they could make sense of the new practices. For example, although they saw classmates approach teachers for help, many hesitated to do so, because in China, 'when teachers ask if you understand or not, normally you say yes no matter what, and students asked silly questions would be teased relentlessly' (Tianyi, female, one year in Australia). It could take long time for them to identify what questions could be asked, and how teachers and peers might react.

Regarding interactions with Australian students, two thirds of survey participants (30) agreed or strongly agreed that local peers were friendly, helpful, and willing to talk. As Lauren (female, one year in Australia) stated, 'at first, I worried that they would exclude me, but then I found out they won't. People were genuinely helpful, like you were walking with a lot of stuff in your hands then someone would approach and ask if you need help, which is pretty good'.

However, friendly gestures were not enough for students to overcome cultural barriers. Growing up in different countries, students who tried to interact with locals often found that they did not have enough shared knowledge for a comfortable conversation. Chris (male, three years in Australia) remembered that, 'a local classmate and I both like Japanese anime and sometimes we would discuss what we watched recently. Yet soon we would run out of things to talk about.' In this case, simply bringing local and international students together might not help, as 'it is so embarrassing to be with them (the locals) but have nothing to say.'

Sports were considered as an effective means for Chinese students to understand the local culture and mix with local peers, but there were also limitations to this. For instance, Chinese students were hesitant to participate in 'Aussie' sports like Australian football,

since 'we would not be able to handle it, we don't know the rules, and most players are non-Chinese'. Those who played a sport with local teammates sometimes felt excluded. Peter (male, four years in Australia) had a classmate who joined the basketball team but 'nobody passed the ball to him and the coach did not give him chance to play', partly because the student did not communicate well with his teammates. Although English might be a problem, it may also be that he was not familiar with the local slang and practices.

As indicated in the literature [35,44], Chinese students face an information gap that affects their academic and social experiences. As cultural novices, they have limited knowledge about standards, unstated assumptions, and norms of the local community [53], which hinders the adjustment process. They know that learning about local culture, such as watching and playing Australian football, would make it easier for them to communicate with local peers, but many felt the gap was too big to fill. Educators have developed a variety of programmes to facilitate mutual learning between local and international students [11,58,59]. Their assumption seemed to be that effective intercultural communication/learning would take place once opportunities of regular interactions were created, and often focused on creating an ideal setting for collaboration. Students' own accounts, however, showed that one significant challenge was to adopting a large amount of cultural knowledge in a short time. Without such knowledge, even when chances of interactions were provided, they did not necessarily lead to meaningful and comfortable communication. In the future, more attention should probably be drawn to the acquisition of cultural knowledge, and the development of relevant awareness, resources, and inquiry skills.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

This paper explores how Chinese students understand challenges and supports at Australian schools. In terms of classroom learning, rather than waiting for students to adopt certain practices via immersion, it might be helpful to explicitly discuss with them different learning skills, norms, and standards in host and home countries. In terms of English learning, intensive English courses might function better if the connection between them and the mainstream classroom could be made explicit; in addition to language teaching, it might also be important to address students' concerns over being underestimated or seen as incompetent. In terms of socialising, in addition to nurturing a positive attitude, we should probably also pay attention to the real communication difficulties experienced by students due to cultural gaps that cannot be filled by a few interactions. Since learning differences, language proficiency gaps, and the lack of local cultural knowledge are also problems faced by non-Chinese international students, it is reasonable to argue that findings of this case study at least partly reflect their experiences as well.

The study also contains some limitations. First, there is the small survey sample size with an unbalanced male/female ratio, which could lead to potential biases. Second, although both the surveys and focus group questions were designed to capture students' authentic understanding, they are one-off data collection tools that rely on self-reported information. Third, participants are mainly from four Australian independent schools and their experiences might be different from other international students (e.g., those in public schools). Although these findings could sensitise us to the possibility of multiple reference points, they are not generalisable evidence that is sufficient for the alteration of practices. We hope this study will feed forward to ongoing scholarly research in different school communities with a longer data collection period.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, and approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee in 2018 (Project ID: 12680).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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