

Belongingness and Identity of International School Students in Hong Kong: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores international school students' sense of belonging and sense of identity to and in relation to Hong Kong. The interviewing of students from both Chinese speaking and non-Chinese speaking backgrounds offered greater insight as to how international school students position themselves in Hong Kong society and the manner in which they do so. It finds that international school students' perceived lack of proficiency in Cantonese, diverse ethnic, cultural and national background, as well as upbringing and education in an international school encourage them to conceptualise their belongingness identity beyond the physical borders of Hong Kong. It also finds that, despite a sense of difference to Hong Kong society albeit to differing degrees, these students view home as where they had grown up, made memories and established relationships; for many of them, it was Hong Kong. The implications for local cultural education and intermingling between students of different school systems are also explored. The findings of this study contribute to the limited literature on the impacts of international schooling on youth's ideation of identity in relation to their host societies.

Introduction

Initially created for children of expatriates living abroad, international schools have since taken an expansionary route and taken root in many metropolitan cities around the world (Hayden, 2011) - Hong Kong is no exception. In recent years, the international school system has gained prominence in Hong Kong as an attractive destination of choice for local middle-to-upper class Chinese as well expatriate families seeking English-medium, anglophone education (Slethaug, 2010). As of 2018, up to 6% of Hong Kong's sixty-nine thousand students attend international schools (HKSAR Research Office, 2018). Bryceson and Vuorela (2002) assert that being a student in an international school is associated with gaining "the symbolic capital of language" as well as enhanced cross-national mobility and citizenship. This status quo is reinforced by the government citing international schools as an "important social infrastructure to maintain Hong Kong's status as an international centre and vibrant cosmopolitan city" (Slethaug, 2010), furthering the appeal for such international-styled education to both local and expatriate populations. Consequently, there emerges a population within Hong Kong that, while having resided here for the majority of their lives, are not largely educated in and in tune with local culture and beliefs, with some not knowing the local language (referring to spoken Cantonese and written Chinese) at all. This study aims to explore how these students, while educated within a non-local context and system, negotiate their belongingness and identity to Hong Kong.

Literature Review

Properties of belonging

The properties of belonging are multidimensional (Fenster, 2005; Antonsich, 2010; Wright, 2014; Yuval-Davis, 2016), both in terminology and in practice. Contemporary scholars articulate two notions in which sense of belonging disseminates or is disseminated upon individuals: the politics of belonging (Hoffmann & Ignatieff, 1994; Croucher, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2016) and that of *place-belongingness*. The politics of belonging deals with the dimensions of belonging that is shaped and characterised by formally structured, public-orientated statuses such as that of legality (i.e. citizenship) (Fenster, 2005), race, class, language etc. (Yuval-Davis, 2016). Often iterated in contexts of oppression, the politics of belonging is hence, in the words of Wright (2014) “treated as a [symbolic] resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion”. Elaborating on the role of language in the politics of belonging, Gu et al. (2017) furthers this claim in her research on South Asian student’s identity construction in Hong Kong by establishing the role of language proficiency (or lack thereof) as an inhibiting factor to belonging. In this sense, language is seen as a form of symbolic capital which could be legitimised or devalued under different contexts (Pavlenko, 2000), thus having significant implications for an individual’s socio-economic status (Gu et al., 2017). This line of reasoning is consistent with Wright’s (2014) observation that the notion of belonging, at times, is heavily dependent on political and social institutions. All in all, an individual’s perception of their belonging is unavoidably intertwined with the politics of belonging.

Nevertheless, the bounds in which individuals create senses of belonging do not lie entirely within the borders of politics. *Place-belongingness* (hooks, 2009; Antonsich, 2010) analyses belonging as an intimate and personal connection an individual has to their “home”, whether it be a physical place (Ignatieff, 2001; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2007) or in relation to other people (hooks, 2009; Wright, 2014). Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2007) establishes that home is a site where individuals are able to connect with each other, to which Ahmed (2004) attributes a sense of shared sentiment as the main driver for belonging. To this regard, there is a large emphasis on the continuous processes in which an individual negotiates their belonging based on their personal experiences and relationships as to where “home” is (Antonsich, 2010). As such, the notion of belonging is painted as “an accumulation of familiarity, comfort, support and emotional attachment” (Gao et al., 2018). This reflects much of Williams and Stack’s (1997) findings in her investigation of African Americans’ phenomenon of return migration from the urban North to the rural South in that belonging in their terms, was not so much about wanting to return to where they have left, but the continuous longing and desire to be in an environment they could make a difference in.

It is to be noted, though, that rather than being opposing theories, the aforementioned notions are by very nature, interconnected (Fenster, 2005; Antonsich, 2010). It is in the same way that language can be mobilised in the politics of belonging to convey notions of exclusion from the dominant group (Antonsich, 2010) that it could also be used in evoking senses of familiarity and community (place-belongingness) within a minority group (Ignatieff, 1994). On this account, Wright (2014) proposes a *weak theory* approach in which phenomena are seen as entangled and interconnected rather than opposing or contrasting with aims of creating “surprising” conclusions that synthesise a greater variety of factors. Gilmartin & Migge (2015) utilised Wright’s (2014) framework in their study on narrative of identity amongst immigrants in Ireland. Taking into account both challenges in language in the politics of belonging and micro-level interactions, Gilmartin & Migge (2015) was able to demonstrate how linguistic strategies of individuals affect their conceptualisation of “home”. Gao et al. (2019) took a similar approach in her study of Non-Chinese speaking ethnic minority students in Hong Kong in asserting the interconnectedness between language proficiency and sense of belonging.

Identifying the gap

This being said, there is very little existing literature that investigates belonging using a *weak theory approach* within a linguistic but non-ethnic minority context (Gu & Patkin, 2013; Gu et al., 2017; Gao et al., 2019). More specifically, very little research has been conducted on the processes of identity formation within international schools of which students often find themselves in a minority linguistic context despite not being an ethnic minority. Noting that adolescents of a minority linguistic group encounter unique challenges to construction of identity and conceptualisation of social location from the dominant societal group (Slethaug, 2010) regardless of ethnicity, the present study aims to establish a clear understanding within this shortage of literature. The study aims to explore how international school students negotiate their belongingness and identities navigating in an English-medium school while living in a Chinese-dominated society all the while paying close attention for potential similarities and differences across diverse cultural and language groups. It operates within Wright's (2014) *weak theory framework*, connecting the macro forces of the politics of belonging with micro, ground-level interactions which shapes international school students' *place-belongingness* and identities.

Methodology

A qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews was employed in this study. In exploring the context-specific sentiments of belongingness as well as processes of identity formation, interviews were able to draw greater insight and depth into participant's experiences, beliefs and perceptions than that of other qualitative methods such as questionnaires (Kvale, 1996). This study draws from 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with students of different cultural backgrounds, aged 16-18. All participants were enrolled in a privately-funded, English-medium international school in Hong Kong that offers a non-local, American curriculum education that runs from kindergarten up to high school.

Participants

Interested participants were recruited then screened in accordance to the following selection criteria: (a) The participants had been students of the selected international school for at least four years to ensure some degree of immersion to the school community, (b) must have lived in Hong Kong for at least five years to ensure some degree of connectedness towards Hong Kong society and environment, and (c) be a upper high school student who is experiencing and able to iterate complex sentiments of belongingness and notions of identity formation. Statements of consent were read and agreed upon prior to interviews. For the purpose of the study, the term Non-Chinese speaking (NCS) will be used to refer to students who do not understand both spoken Cantonese and written Chinese, and Chinese speaking (CS) used to refer to students who understand both spoken Cantonese and written Chinese. Exactly half of these participants were NCS and Chinese was not the primary language used at home (see Table 1). The remaining participants were CS and Chinese was the primary language used at home (see Table 2).

Table 1. Non-Chinese speaking student's background information

Student	Gender	Age	Race Ethnicity	Place of birth	Length of HK residency	Time spent in International school	Cantonese Speaking
1	F	17	Korean	South Korea	9 years	9 years	No
2	F	18	Filipino	Philippines	Since birth	14 years	
3	M	18	White/ Chinese mixed	Australia	8 years	8 years	
4	F	18	White	USA	5 years	5 years	
5	F	17	Korean	USA	6 years	6 years	
6	M	18	Chinese/ Japanese mixed	Hong Kong	Since birth	12 years	
7	M	18	White/ Filipino mixed	USA	17 years	14 years	
8	F	17	Chinese/ White Asian mixed	Hong Kong	10 years	10 years	
9	M	17	White	Singapore	9 years	9 years	
10	M	17	Korean	South Korea	8 years	8 years	

Table 2. Chinese speaking student's background information.

Student	Gender	Age	Race Ethnicity	Place of birth	Length of HK residency	Time spent in International school	Cantonese Speaking
11	F	17	Chinese	USA	15 years	9 years	Yes
12	F	18	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	13 years	
13	F	16	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	12 years	
14	F	17	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	13 years	
15	F	18	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	14 years	
16	M	17	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	14 years	
17	F	18	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	4 years	

18	F	17	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	9 years
19	F	18	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	14 years
20	M	18	Chinese	Hong Kong	Since birth	14 years

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all twenty participants. Duration of interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. Introductory inquiries into participants' backgrounds were followed by broad questions about their experiences of living and interacting with people and the processes in which they find a sense of belonging in Hong Kong. Questions relating to understanding participants' negotiation of identity and belongingness were curated in accordance to Hagerty & Patuský's (1995) Sense of Belonging Indicator (SOBI), which divided belongingness into *valued involvement* - "it's important to me that I am valued or accepted by others", *fit* - "I wonder if there is any place on earth where I really fit in", and *antecedent* - "If I died tomorrow, few people will come to my funeral" (see Appendix 1). Core questions were then addressed in the interview, including (1) To what degree does the interviewee feel connected and belonging to Hong Kong? And, (2) How do your friends make Hong Kong a better place for you? Interviews were carried out mostly in English, with the preferences of participants in mind. With the explicit consent of the participants, all interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

Analysis

The analysis of collected data was largely in line with Strauss & Corbin's (1994) grounded theory approach, in which the emergence of new findings and ideas are done so in an inductive manner. Through the extensive review of interview transcripts as well as the use of *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) - the process in which codes were ascribed to text pertaining to recurring themes - similarities and differences could be drawn between the ideas of different participants hence bringing upon new realisations (Merriam, 1998). This highly interpretive and flexible method of analysis works perfectly in exploring the context-specific experiences, beliefs and ideas of the participants of present study.

Findings

Hypothesis

Given the theoretical background discussed in the literature review, it was proposed language would act as a barrier to belongingness and identity to some minority populations. Within the premises of this study, it was hypothesised that NCS international school students would identify and feel belongingness less to Hong Kong than their CS counterparts. However, findings in this section sheds light on dynamics and phenomena not considered in the current hypothesis and provide new insight as to how international students negotiate their identities and belongingness in Hong Kong.

Language, society, and the politics of belonging: Practical challenges and encounters

Within this theme, NCS and CS students had differing responses to the role of language in shaping belonging all the while sharing a core belief that language, in their minds, was a strong prerequisite towards belonging to and identifying with a place. Generally, NCS students iterated their ideas and struggles with language (more so relating to Chinese

and Cantonese) more extensively than CS students, which was reasonable given that they have to navigate in a foreign language environment every day. To that regard, not knowing Chinese and Cantonese acted as a constraining factor towards NCS students' experience living in Hong Kong and limited their interactions with native Cantonese speakers. Student 2 and 7 cited experiences of not being able to order food at a local restaurant as well as getting lost in transportation as illustrations of inconveniences they encounter as a result of not knowing Chinese and Cantonese. Student 3 said, "For me, I see even a struggle to ask the bus driver [where the bus stops]...[Therefore] I don't really interact with people who can't speak English much." Student 8 furthered this sentiment by saying, "[Being] in an international school, I only ever travel between [home], school and church, which are all English speaking. If I had to venture out of it, I think I'd feel pretty helpless." As a result of this language barrier, these NCS students are largely constricted to English-speaking environments as well as deterred from venturing to places they deem not *English-friendly*. Despite these practical challenges, though, NCS students had not been driven to learn Chinese or Cantonese to an extensive degree. Student 2 elaborated:

[Since] I've been in an English-speaking (international school) my whole life along with English-speaking friends, and the only times where I struggle with [Chinese] is to and fro home. At home I speak English and I don't have any other instance where I have to speak Chinese.

This phenomenon presents itself almost like that of a feedback loop - NCS students are limited to their linguistic communities because they don't know Chinese, yet do not feel the need to learn Chinese because their interactions are limited within their linguistic communities. All in all, it seems that NCS students, if anything, have come to terms and are content with not knowing Chinese or Cantonese while living in Hong Kong.

On the other hand, since they are proficient in Chinese and Cantonese by definition, CS students did not express struggles of a practical language barrier as NCS students did. Interestingly, though, some students iterated a perceived "lingo" barrier along the lines of the use and not understanding Cantonese slang in their interactions with "locals" (student 11, 18). Additionally, some CS students expressed that while they understand Chinese, they are worried that they may not speak like local people (student 11, 12, 13, 17, 18). Student 12 said, "While I've lived here my entire life...I may not be as fluent or as good with Cantonese as traditionally [expected] from the culture." This reflects a perceived deficiency in Cantonese speech and slang felt by many of these CS students, and seemed to hamper the interactions between them and native Cantonese speakers. Student 19 expanded:

I think [while] my Cantonese itself is [good] enough to be used with local kids, knowing how to converse with them...I wouldn't say I'm fluent to the point where I can have a deep and [profound] conversation with a 'local'...It's a mindset I have, and I'm afraid to [interact] because I'm afraid of judgement, and that stops me from interacting with a lot of people.

This was a surprising phenomena as though they are proficient in the language, these students still perceived a weakness and hierarchy within their Chinese language ability as compared to native speakers, which in turn plays a role in affecting their interactions and experiences with native Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong.

Ultimately, these international school students seemed to be united in the belief that language plays an important role in cultivating their senses of belonging. This belief was expressed more so as a reflection of a perceived language barrier hampering these students' belongingness in Hong Kong. Student 9 said, "I [feel] it is much harder to say that I fully belong in Hong Kong because I don't speak the language, which is a staple of being from here." Student 5 furthered that by saying, "I feel if I knew more of the language, I would feel more accepted here in Hong Kong." Sometimes, local people would become active actors in imposing sentiments of non-belongingness in the eyes of the students. Student 11 recalled an experience of being responded to in English by a store clerk despite speaking to them in Cantonese:

"My initial reaction was, do I have an accent or something that makes me sound like a foreigner? So I try to pronounce better and use some slang. But [over time] it has made me feel like I get treated differently [as a result of the way I speak]."

These sentiments are consistent with Pavlenko's (2000) claims that language and how it is relayed is perceived as a form of social capital - in this student's scenario, her irregular accent in speaking Cantonese caused her to perceive a loss of such capital. Making reference to the literature review, these international school students seem to echo and recognise how the politics of belonging prevent them from feeling a full sense of belonging to Hong Kong. What is most interesting about these findings is the feelings of exclusion and sense of difference, albeit to differing degrees, was expressed by both NCS and CS students. Such phenomena may suggest that belongingness, in these international school students' minds, may not solely be dictated by language but are also drawn along different lines.

Sense of identity: Conflicting circumstances and ideals

Within this theme, there remains a slight division in responses between NCS and CS students but also a greater range of shared ideas that were expressed. Something to note within this section is the decreased role of language in shaping a sense of identity - there were little to no mentions of such from students' responses. Instead, these students chose to attribute other factors in their personal negotiations of identity. Within NCS students, there was an emergence of a recurring theme of conflicts in identity along the parameters of their personal upbringing in conjunction with their race-ethnicity. This was a variable that, while noted, was not paid emphasis by the current study and presented itself as a new revelation - hence the advantage of interviews and open coding. On self-identification, student 7 said, "It's always been tricky, because my parents are from the Philippines and the States, but I've lived in Hong Kong my whole life and I think each of those aspects played a role in [shaping] who I am." Student 3 expressed a sense of confusion while trying to communicate their identity, saying, "...When I [meet] someone, I say that I'm Australian, but who I am is shaped by Hong Kong...So even though I'm from Australia, It's Hong Kong that's made me who I am. So I guess in that sense I'm a Hong Kong person, but Australian [by blood]?" These internal discourses are sometimes triggered by interactions with others; student 1, who is Korean, said, "Most of my conversations I engage with people are about Korean culture...They view me as a Korean, so I act like a Korean." These NCS students regarded their upbringing in Hong Kong as a contributing factor to their internal identification, but also struggled to negotiate that against their external identities (race-ethnicities). Student 6, who ethnically identifies as Chinese and Japanese, provided an alternative perspective:

I consider myself more American than Chinese even though I've lived my entire life [in Hong Kong]...My parents raised me in an English-speaking household and I very much follow in my mom's footsteps and learn what she says...she [relays] the culture through stories. [Hence] the idea of American culture had just gotten ingrained within [me] since I was [brought up] that way.

Antonsich (2010) expressed that people often perceive belongingness and identification to a place in an assimilationist manner. For these multinational NCS students, this belief clashes with their personal realities of multiple upbringings and identities (internal and external), adding to their complex processes of identity formation.

CS students, on the other hand, approached the negotiation of their identities in a different manner. Generally, CS students express the process in which they identify with Hong Kong and its people easier. Student 3 said, "As far as the general people [in Hong Kong], I find that I do relate and identify with them because they are technically my people." CS students mainly attributed this to their shared ethnicity with Hong Kong's majority population (student 12, 13, 20). This being said, these CS students had identified and established their experiences of *international schooling* as an external factor influencing their identification with and towards Hong Kong. On self-identification, student 12 said, "I would introduce myself as a person from Hong Kong, but also from somewhat of an international background [because] I'm from an international school." Explicit mention of their international schooling was a common recurrence when discussing their identity (student 11, 12, 13, 15, 19), which sheds light and calls into question the true implications of such international schooling towards students' formation of identity. In some instances, this quality was emphasised upon and superimposed onto these students by local people. Student 12 said, "When I'm with my

international school friends, I feel that we're treated differently [just because of our school background]...I do get self-conscious about that." Student 19 elaborates further:

When I say I'm from an international school, a lot of 'locals' become interested and have a lot of questions to ask, which is really weird [since] we grew up in the same place but also in completely different worlds (school systems). [As a result], I felt kind of foreign. Even now, I still feel a bit foreign, which is kind of sad. In these CS students' eyes, their background of international schooling plays a great part in their identification both personally and in relation to Hong Kong. To these CS students, this was conceptualised in both a personally enriching manner (student 11, 12, 16, 18) as well as (sometimes simultaneously) in an inhibiting manner towards their identification with Hong Kong (student 11, 14, 15, 19).

Nevertheless, these international school students were united in certain personal beliefs on their identities. First and foremost, the frequent use of the term *locals* in reference to the general population in Hong Kong by these students alludes to an internal differentiation of an in-group and an out-group. Some students established this differentiation on the basis of schooling background (student 2, 6, 10, 11, 14, 17, 19, 20). Student 19 said, "There's a big gap between local and international schools because we don't know a lot about each other, and there's no bridge between us." Student 14 discussed this in tandem with current events in Hong Kong, "I think I [was] less affected as local people and students, [since] they are studying here for university and work here whereas I plan on going abroad." A seemingly lack of knowledge of local school students and differences in plans for higher education seem to contribute to this differentiation within international school students. Student 11 gives further insight:

I notice that some of my peers are very distanced from Hong Kong culture, and unintentionally segregate themselves as a result...and sometimes I feel that [distance] too but I can't help it because it's very much a two-way thing [between international school students and local school students].

From these international school students' perspective, a lack of interactions and opportunities to do so with local school students have influenced them to feel a sense of difference from the general population of Hong Kong.

In other instances, the differentiation between the local population and these international school students were based on a perceived difference in culture in terms of types of media consumed and cultural ideals. Student 2 said, "I feel like I wouldn't get along with [local school students] well because much of my humour and personality is stemmed in [Western] media". Student 17 adds on, "I think I culturally align with Western cultures...I am [up to date] with news and the US presidential election more so than the politics in Hong Kong." These students expressed how their consumption of Western media has affected how they situate themselves in Hong Kong. Moreover, some students perceive a discrepancy between their personal values and those of Hong Kong people (student 2, 5, 8, 13, 18, 19). Student 18 said, "Although geographically speaking, I'm from Hong Kong, value-wise I am more [inclined] towards the Western way of thinking...such as on current events." Student 19 draws a connection between their media consumption and ideation of values:

I think growing up in an international school [from a young age] really affected me...I grew up with Western influences, watching American media. I would see how they interact with one another and find my ideals around them...it very much [contrasts] the environment in Hong Kong.

Rader and Sittig (2003) assert that international school students' transient lifestyles may cause them to feel a sense of rootlessness and confused loyalties. To these students, the politics of their personal experiences and beliefs along with that of the environments they navigate in (international school, Hong Kong) caused them to have extensive internal discourses on their identities. These students perceive a lack of commonalities between their ideals and the realities they are faced with living in Hong Kong, which in turn affected the manner in which they form their identities in - in this case, a heavy emphasis on cultural and societal ideals rather than external and physical traits (geography, race-ethnicities).

Conceptualisation of home: Relationships, experiences and memories

Ultimately, these international school students were united in how they conceptualised *home*. For all of these students, home was the place where they had resided the longest. In some scenarios, this translated into the conceptualisation of *multiple homes* (Student 4, 5, 7). Student 5 said, “When I think of home [in Hong Kong], I think of the US. Yet when I think of home [while I’m] in the states I’d say Hong Kong.” Other than that, home was also thought of in terms of the place where their memories were made - for many students, this was Hong Kong. Student 3 said, “Hong Kong is my home...all the [significant] events in my life that I remember [occurred] in Hong Kong.” Student 15 elaborates:

Hong Kong is home because it is [the] defining place of my childhood...Sometimes when I walk past somewhere and remember the things I did there I feel [nostalgic]...and I feel that there is not one memory from my childhood that does not include Hong Kong.

Fenster (2004) establishes the role of childhood memories in attaching people to a given place. In these students’ cases, their upbringing and memories made in Hong Kong has led to them establishing it as their personal homes.

Lastly, home was often conceptualised in relation to their personal relationships. These students especially emphasised the important role their friends played in making Hong Kong a place they could call home. Student 4 said, “Hong Kong feels more like home now because of the people I’ve gotten to know and friendships I’ve built.” Student 15 adds to that, “I think anywhere with friends makes it a better place and more homely - when my friends head [abroad] for university, Hong Kong would feel less like home just because [of their absence].” Friends seem to play a large role in the lives of these international school students and is illustrated through how they conceptualise home. Student 12 draws a connection between friends and memories:

Hong Kong will forever be the place where I will [return] to. Even if I [venture abroad] I would always return, even for just a visit...I’ve lived my entire life and have lots of memories here, and many of the people in my life reside here, and, I guess, that’s what makes [Hong Kong] my home.

Waite and Gorman-Murray (2007) establishes that home is where one is able to interact and build meaningful relationships. In the context of this study, despite the seemingly overwhelming barriers the politics of belonging imposed on these international school students, many of them still believe that Hong Kong is their home from the interactions and experiences they’ve had in the place and with the people there (*place-belongingness*).

Limitations

Admittedly, this study did have its limitations. Firstly, the slight discrepancy in the background diversity (race, length of residency) of NCS and CS students could be inferred to have yielded results not representative of the general population. This being said, the aim of a case study is to “enable researchers to examine data within a very specific context...and a very limited group of individuals” (Zainal, 2007). With that in mind, the findings of this study, then, could still be largely generalizable to other international school students in Hong Kong. Other than that, the lack of a quantitative component to this study may have prevented the emergence of some themes that correspond with the research question. The weakness of this study to that regard is to be addressed on the basis of the limited time-frame the researcher had been working with. Nevertheless, the lack of such quantitative components could in turn prompt future research to be performed on this subject.

Discussion

This study offers insight into how international school students negotiate their identity and belongingness in Hong Kong. A perceived deficiency in Chinese, albeit to differing degrees, was felt by these international school students as a result of their international schooling and encounters with native Chinese users, and played an exclusionary role

in the politics of their belonging in Hong Kong. Furthermore, these international school students' diverse backgrounds and circumstances (race-ethnicity, nationality, international schooling, media consumption) motivate them to conceptualise their identities beyond the parameters of geography or race-ethnicity and to that of beliefs and ideals. Ultimately, though, despite the seemingly overwhelming barriers to belongingness and identification, to these students, home was where they grew up, where their memories were made and where their relationships were - and for many, home meant Hong Kong.

Conclusion

The findings show that the two groups of students have lots in common in how they negotiate identity and belongingness in Hong Kong despite their different linguistic backgrounds. This would contradict the study's initial hypothesis that language would be the sole determinant in sense of identity and belongingness. Instead, these students were united in the fact they attended an international school, which in turn contributed further nuances and affected the way they situated themselves in relation to others and in Hong Kong. For example, the labeling and differentiation of local peoples on the basis of schooling background and language use reflect subconscious differentiation of an *in-group* and *out-group*. Consequently, the lines in which international school students draw their personal identities and belongingness upon becomes far more complex and abstract.

The findings of this study have many implications for both research and practice. Having reaffirmed notions of belongingness iterated by contemporary scholars, further research could be performed on the specific factors that shape belongingness and identity. Currently, we propose that the relationship between peer friendships and belongingness be further investigated as inspired by the emphasis placed upon it by the participants of this study in how their friends make Hong Kong "more like home". Furthermore, it is proposed from both an educational and policy-making perspective that inter-school programs be held between local and international schools in Hong Kong to rectify the gap of knowledge of students from both systems. Through increased interactions and intermingling between local and international school students, senses of difference could be greatly diminished and belongingness to a shared diverse society be established.

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