SINCE ITS OFFICIAL INCEPTION in the early 1990s, the project of building an Asia literate society in Australia through schooling has put an emphasis on the development of broad knowledge and language skills. Asia literacy has been largely understood as a skill-set that young Australians can draw upon in developing a regional and global mindset for their engagement with Asia. This notion of Asia literacy prioritises its epistemological foundation (i.e. knowing-about-ness) and does not pay due attention to the relational side of becoming Asia literate. As a result, the key Asia related policy documents, the Australian Curriculum and the models of professional learning for teachers have little engagement with a form of ethics grounded in one’s ability to respond to both proximal and distant ‘others’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012; ACARA, 2011). This, I believe, has important implications for addressing the key challenges in building Asia literacy in Australia—a nation-state that continues to search for ethical bearings for living and learning with ‘others’. Asia literacy, beyond knowledge, skills and understandings, demands openness to the ‘other’ and a more ethical way of recognising differences.

The ethics of developing Asia literacy in schools emerges as a central concern in the current context of raising the accountability of teachers for Asia-relevant learning outcomes. One of the reasons for this is that educational accountability reflects the prevailing economic model, putting pressure on education systems to increase teacher productivity. From this perspective, the effective ‘delivery’ of the Asia priority objectives across school systems depends in many ways on the quality of the teaching workforce. This means getting the right people to become teachers, raising professional standards and putting in place targeted support and resources to build Asia relevant capabilities. Indeed, teacher quality is now widely recognised as an important factor accounting for a larger share of the variance in students’ achievement than any other single factor, including poverty, race and parent education (Darling-Hammond, 2006). However, teaching quality, as measured by standards and learning outcomes, cannot capture the fullness of teachers’ work. Performance indicators and numbers are not suitable for representing the relational complexity of pedagogical practice or the role of teacher identity in decision making. It is important, therefore, to turn to ethics in order to understand how effective teachers work and what drives their sense of responsibility in pedagogical practice and decision making.

A study conducted by Halse, Cloonan, Dyer, Kostogriz, Toe and Weinmann (2013) demonstrated the key role of ethics in becoming an Asia literate teacher, as well as in practising Asia literacy in schools. The study was commissioned by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) to determine the capabilities and professional knowledge, practice and engagement of teachers in delivering the Asia priority across the curriculum. It used the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011) to identify how or whether the standards can recognise the work of Asia literate teachers and school leaders. The study design incorporated a large-scale national survey, extensive narrative data collected from teachers and principals, and case studies of Asia literate teachers at different points on the career continuum and in different schools across Australia.

Although the national professional standards provided a framework to determine and foster the professional capabilities of an Asia literate teaching workforce, they also had some limitations. For instance, due to their abstract nature, professional standards could not capture the local richness of professional practice or the ethical sensibilities of teachers in making pedagogical decisions. Yet, the teachers’ stories of becoming Asia literate and their perspectives on how they engage their students in studies of Asia or Asian languages affirmed the primacy of ethics. This recognition emerged as the teachers talked about their sense of responsibility for the students in their schools and local communities. Teachers and school leaders acknowledged the
prevalence of socio-cultural reasons for implementing Asia literacy in their schools as a way of responding to the needs and demands of their students rather than to the external accountability measures. Asia literacy for them has become tantamount to social justice in and through education.

These research findings enable us to problematise references to the abstract codes of practice in professional standards and policy statements that are used to raise the accountability of teachers for the Asia-relevant capabilities of students (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). Such a view of ethics—as a duty-based perspective on delivering learning outcomes from which one might judge the performance of teachers and their effectiveness—is de-ontological. It is located apart from the actual situations of practice, which the overwhelming majority of Asia literate teachers are obliged to negotiate. This type of ethics does not adequately recognise the particularity and situatedness of teachers’ actions. It is simply insufficient to present teacher professional ethics as bureaucratic accountability or duty to perform (Kostogriz, 2011a, b), as an ‘ought’ against which the actions of individual teachers can be judged. In this regard, teacher accountability for Asia literacy in Australian schools should be supplemented by responsibility.

Teachers’ sense of responsibility and their ability to respond to differences are fundamental to what counts as being Asia literate teachers—those who are able to feel confident within themselves about their capacity to be responsive to the young people with whom they interact on a daily basis. This is to raise the question of professional ethics, not simply as a code that sets limits to professional practice, but as a life-affirming responsiveness to others, to social and cultural differences, to the multiplicities of students’ needs in our schools. Teaching is always situated in relation to others insofar as teachers are obliged to respond to the call of their students. Everyone is saying ‘Here I am!’—a call that every teacher recognises and struggles to answer (cf. Levinas, 1987). For, at this level of responsiveness, there are no codes of conduct that will unfailingly enable a teacher to make the right pedagogical decision (cf. Derrida, 2000). Hence, the project of building an Asia literate teaching workforce extends beyond the political-economic concerns about the productivity of teachers and their accountability for Asia literacy. It is associated with how teachers understand their responsibility for Asia literacy in local practices. This prompts us to question professional ethics and, indeed, to approach the notion of ‘responsibility’ in Asia literacy education as the very condition of social justice. The ethics of developing Asia literacy demands hospitable education that welcomes the identities, cultures and languages of the ‘other’ to learning spaces. According to Derrida (2000, p. 25), the ethics of hospitality requires that “I open my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, arrive, let him take his place in the place that I offer him.”

The idea of hospitable education has been developed to mitigate exclusion, relation of power and alienation of culturally, linguistically and religiously different students in Australian schools (Kostogriz, 2009, 2011a, b). The notion of hospitality compels educators to ask the question of difference in a particular way: how can these students be responded to respectfully and ethically so that they draw on their cultural resources in the classroom? First and foremost, for Asia literate teachers this means appropriating a place for themselves from which they can welcome the other. This also means making a shift from the centredness on the culturally dominant ways of seeing Asia and Asian others that is currently imbedded in the curriculum to one of seeing this knowledge relationally or dialogically with others. The idea of hospitable education obliges teachers to think not only about what it means to welcome students that are ‘others’ but also what it means to recognise their identities, values, texts, knowledges and meanings in the learning environment. This is a challenging pedagogical project as it demands the teacher move away from the idea of managing differences though the regulation and validation of learning processes to approach their role as a matter of responsibility—that is, as a matter of being able to respond to what culturally different students bring to the classroom and to the learning event. It is only then that the issue of hospitable education has relevance for developing Asia literacy in local schools and multicultural classrooms.

For education to be hospitable and welcoming to the Asian other, it needs to be extended without the imposition of any condition for culturally different students to assimilate or for their cultures and knowledges to be devalued. A hospitable Asia literacy education requires a radical openness and responsability to the ‘other’, as the very idea of hospitality
implies that the ‘other’ be welcomed as a human being, not as a stereotyped ‘other’. This poses a challenge to how one can recognise differences as human beings in a system of schooling that is still configured to marginalise and exclude, homogenise and normalise. The key issue here is shifting the focus away from the ideologically or economically mediated ways of relating to the proximal and distant Asia to the primacy of ethics in everyday classroom events, as a responsibility for building students’ capability to engage with Asia in a post-Orientalist way. This is also a question of shifting away from learning how to live side-by-side with strangers to learning how to live with them face-to-face. Needless to say, the possibility of interrupting the cultural, linguistic or epistemological ‘logocentrism’ and the ‘ontology of sameness’ with regard to Asia will depend on the possibility of engaging all students in dialogical learning from and with difference and restoring a sense of the agency of those ‘others’ who have been excluded and marginalised in the process of inhospitable education.

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