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Asia literacy and schooling

Guest Editor: Christine Halse, Deakin University

Asia literacy is a ‘hot topic’. The federal government’s White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012a) and subsequent Implementation Plan (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013a) set out to provide a ‘roadmap’ for building an ‘Asia capable’ Australia by 2025.

Teachers, schools and the curriculum have been assigned leading roles in realizing this national vision. In the new Australian Curriculum, ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ is one of the three designated priorities to be taught across all curriculum areas. The National Plan for School Improvement (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013c) and National Education Reform Agreement (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013b) tie federal funding for schools to the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, and require school sectors to provide ‘significant’ exposure to studies of Asia and develop provision for ‘continuous access’ to one of four priority Asian languages—Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi, Indonesian and Japanese—for all primary and secondary students.

Asia literacy is not a new curriculum agenda. In 1970, the Auchmuty Report (1970) on The Teaching of Asian Languages and Cultures in Australia noted the limited opportunities to learn Asian languages or to systematically study Asian affairs, and the need for government investment in training teachers and developing resources. Nearly two decades later, the Garnaut Report (1989) on Australia and the North-East Asian Ascendancy reiterated the need for Australians to become more expert and experienced in living in and dealing with the cultures and societies of Asia.

For the ensuing 40 years, dozens of government reports and scholarly papers rehearsed the same argument. Rhetoric did not translate into action until 1996 when the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to the school strategy for building Asian languages and studies laid out in the Rudd Report (1994) on Asian Languages and Australia’s Economic Future. Over the next decades, federal, state and territory governments invested half a billion dollars in building studies and languages of Asia through the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALAS) Strategy (1995–2002) and the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) (2008–09, 2011–12).

There were also significant policy initiatives. In 2006, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsed the National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools (DEST, 2006). Two years later, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) decreed that all young Australians needed to be ‘Asia literate’. An updated National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools 2011–2012 (AEE, 2011) continued the political push for Asia literacy, and culminated in Asia priority in the Australian Curriculum, and the focus on Asia literacy in the White Paper and the national plans for School Improvement (2013) and Education Reform (2013).

In contrast to the golden years of lavish government funding, compliance rather than cash (the stick not the carrot) characterises current government policy. Yet across the historical trajectory of Asia literacy, the key messages have remained constant.

i) Asia literacy means the knowledge, skills and understandings of the languages, histories, geographies, arts and cultures needed to engage with the Asian region (AEE, 2012);

ii) Asia literacy will provide the ‘fundamental skills and abilities that will drive Australia’s economic and jobs growth’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012b) and it is ‘vital to the prosperity of Australia’ (ACARA, 2012); and,

iii) Schools are the ‘most effective channel’ for equipping all young Australians with Asia literacy and realising “long-term, sustainable generational change” (AEE, 2012, np; Rudd, 1994, p. 98).

Nevertheless, there is broad agreement that decades of policy initiatives and financial investment have resulted in only ‘small-scale progress towards Asia literacy becoming a universally attainable school
his starting point the situated dynamics of multi-culturalism and the need for students to learn to live with difference in their own multicultural communities. He argues that Australia can only know Asia by knowing the "cultural other in its own backyard" but that understanding cultural difference and building intercultural understanding cannot be gained through "textbook knowledge" that disconnects and disenages young people. Instead, he proposes mobilising popular culture and new media forms to enable young people to participate in social relations, engage in contemporary social issues and undertake collaborative work to build intercultural understanding.

In the final article, Kostogriz considers Asia literacy in relation to teachers' work. Building on insights from a national study of the Asia literacy and the Australian Teaching Workforce (Ilse et al., 2013), he argues that the Asia literate teacher cannot be measured by knowledge of content, standards or performance indicators. Rather, it is teachers' responsibility and ability to respond to difference that is fundamental to being an Asia literate teacher. He proposes a "new pedagogical project" to nurture teachers' ethical sensibilities as "hostile educators" so they can recognise and respond to the identities, values, knowledge and meanings that culturally and ethnically diverse students bring to the learning environment, and engage all students in dialogical learning from and with difference.

References


