

**SAL091552**

***Defining 'Asia' – Refashioning of the Australian Curriculum***

Peta Salter

James Cook University

**Abstract**

The federal Government's 'Education Revolution' has been met with great debate, as have calls for greater national consistency in school curriculum. Promoted as a 'key platform for productivity growth, this education revolution seeks to improve the qualitative and quantitative investment in the skills of the workforce – driven in part by [a] \$11 billion Education Investment Fund' (Rudd, 2008). Additionally, the National Curriculum Board's consultative process is underway building Australia's future curriculum; a major undertaking that requires a strong research and conceptual base to ensure it is authentically beneficial to the Australian education system.

Historically, the term 'Asia' itself has been a debatable point of reference: 'while the word 'Asia' is in everyday use and is printed in atlases, it is nevertheless a widely contested concept' (AEF, 2006, p.7). It can be defined in geographical, cultural, religious, historical and linguistic terms. Couple this potential mystification with a long and tumultuous historical relationship between Australia and Asia, and the federal government's positioning of 'Asia Literacy' as a pivotal part of their 'Education Revolution', while it can be seen as a necessary and important refocussing of Australian educational policy, also becomes fraught with complications.

This latest reinvigoration of studies of Asia is defended in terms of economic necessity and national priorities, such as multiculturalism. 'Multicultural education' encompasses a broad range of scholarship and yet the task of inserting an 'Asian voice' in the multi-cultural dialogue of Australian educators is not a new idea. Substantial work has been done with respect to exploring multicultural education in curriculum reform; however the specific challenges posed to Australian education in regards to perspectives of Asia are largely underdeveloped. The body of research in this area is emerging with the exponential economic expansion of Asia, particularly China and India. A major ideological and curriculum shift may be needed to consider how studies of Asia are integral to multicultural education. Is this integration a paradigm in which diversity, and potentially cultural boundaries are celebrated by looking at the cultural 'other' through conservative multiculturalism, or is 'Asia literacy' approached with a more critical pedagogy?

This paper identifies and addresses three key issues that problematise the refashioning of the Australian curriculum in the context of the federal government's 'Asia literate' policies. First, it investigates what knowledge base definitions of 'Asia' use and the inherent difficulties in placing boundaries and static definitions on such a dynamic and complex geographical and cultural space. Then, it explores the development of notions of multiculturalism in key historical junctures in Australian history and the challenges posed by contextualising studies of 'Asia' within a popular legacies of this history. Promoting intercultural understanding is a challenging task for all members of our society; a challenge heightened by the problematic nature of the use of the term 'Asia' itself, and historical legacies of the use of this term in Australian society. Following an analysis of the implications of the representations of 'Asia literate' knowledge in policy documents and resulting tensions, the paper closes with

questions raised regarding the implications of the circulation of 'Asia literacy' in Australian educational contexts.

### **Introducing 'Asia'**

A refashioning of the Australian Curriculum in line with calls for Asia literacy poses unique challenges and potential misunderstandings that need to be addressed long before the framing of an 'Asia literate' national curriculum.

Firstly, what does the term 'Asia literate' really mean? Discourse surrounding the term literacy, a political construct that is fast gaining ground as a marketing tool for diverse means, goes beyond the limited classification of 'the function of language'. The term itself was made public by the then Prime Minister Hawke in the 1980s. It has been circulating in political and education policy rhetoric since. The Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum paper; *Asian Studies in Queensland Schools*, published in 1991, explains that:

although the concept of Asia literacy does include language competency, it goes beyond this. The concept also embraces the notion of cultural literacy...the term 'Asia literacy', therefore, refers to the intellectual uses of the study of Asia and the question of Australian identity. (p.3)

For 'Asia literacy', the concept extends beyond merely learning Asian languages to other intellectual and educational practices. The Asia Education Foundation (AEF) has been considered a vital strength in the promotion of 'Asia literacy' in Australian schools since its conception in 1992, but what are the implications when understandings of 'Asia' are problematic?

The AEF's current framework for teaching and learning about the cultures of Asia, the *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools* published in 2006 and considered a national policy statement, itself acknowledges that the concept of Asia is contestable (p.7). For the purposes of this paper, 'Asia' will refer to a geographical region that includes complex subregions that form the area most Australian schools are likely to cover, as outlined in this document:

- North-east Asia including China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan
- South-east Asia including Indonesia, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, East Timor, the Philippines and Cambodia
- South Asia including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. (AEF, 2006, p7)

However, a geographical reference does not necessarily recognise the cultural, religious and historically complex conceptualisations of these nation-states so therefore also acknowledged in this reference is the fact that 'Asia' is not a singular cultural entity.

As the underpinning concept of the Asia Literate campaign, it is imperative that this contestability is explored as this is the first of many points at which understandings of 'Asia literacy' can diverge. The reality is that historically, due to the Eurocentric focus of Australian culture for much of the formative years of the nation, definitions of 'Asia' were informed by visions of Orientalism – the European vision of 'Asia' as the 'exotic' or 'inferior' 'other'. This cultural association is a powerful construct, as has been pointed out by literary critic Edward Said (2003):

men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extend it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ are man-made...the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence’ (p.4-5).

‘Asia’, or the ‘Orient’, has provided a backdrop for European culture to define itself against a culturally distinct ‘other’ that served as part of colonised and therefore subordinate culture from a different geographical point. The perpetuation of an idea or reality of an ‘Orient’ that encompasses geographical and cultural unity has been extensively documented by Said (2003, in Viswanathan 2002) and to some extent by others (Milner & Johnson 2002 & Ryckmans 1993) in the work of European commentators dating back to the ancient Greeks. As such, this geographical and cultural construct could be a difficult manifestation of cultural imperialism for the Australian nation, for so long defined by its British ties, to rupture even though Broinowski highlights the absurdity of this reality as ‘many Australians accepted...that all of Asia was more distant and exotic than Europe’ (1992, p15). Culturally, Australia did have allegiances with Europe, but, geographically at least, it was in fact Europe that was further removed from the Australian experience.

Interestingly, Milner and Johnson (2002) suggest that the ‘Asia’ discourse has more recently been redirected by Asian notions of ‘Asia’; ‘leading representatives of Asian societies are invoking an idea of ‘Asia’ to conjure up a sense of a shared experience, even if it is merely the felt ‘Asian’ experience of a restricted number of people’. They cite leaders such as Sukarno, the former president of Indonesia and Malaysian and Singaporean leaders as invoking ‘Asia’ or ‘Asian’ values as a geographical and culturally distinct entity to the Western society equivalent. This suggests that any possible divide instituted by defining ‘Asia’ in geographical and cultural terms is not necessarily one-sided.

Rizvi is astute in stating that ‘to assume a fundamentally static notion of Asia is to overlook the vast differences that exist within Asia across region, class, gender, religion and politics’ (1997, p.21). As Broinowski suggests, perhaps ‘Asia’ ‘should always be read as if written between quotation marks’ (1992, p.x), such is the plethora of possible definitions of the term. There still begs the questions, however, of what globalisation brings to these notions of ‘Asia’, as it is a force that reconfigures geographical, cultural and ideological boundaries, and how is ‘Asia’ represented in Rudd’s ‘Asia literacy’?

### **Australia and ‘Asia’ – from monoculture to multicultural?**

The question for an Australia that is set to embrace ‘Asia literacy’ is where are we positioned in this context of tension around the conceptualisation of ‘Asia’? Yes, we are in the geographical context of ‘Asia’, yes, we sit in cultural alignment with Europe, particularly the British, but how deeply entrenched is this alignment and in what ways?

To begin the exploration of the historical context surrounding the development of an Asia literate curriculum for Australia, it is useful to understand the history of the economic and political relationships between Australia and ‘Asia’. At different stages in Australia’s history, Asians from a number of different countries have migrated to

Australia for a variety of different reasons, and major influxes have had marked effects on Australian society. However, there is a tendency that the cultural diversity within 'Asia' is conflated with the identification of 'Asia' as a singular geographical and cultural entity.

Asians were not considered significant immigrants to Australia until the realisation of a potential labour shortage at the end of the convict system however the first arrival of large numbers came with the discovery of gold in the 1850s. Historically, the emphasis of Asian immigration has primarily revolved around labour; from the first Indian labourers imported in the nineteenth century to more recent migrants who meet the 'skill sets' required by Australian immigration requirements<sup>1</sup>.

Early on gold did attract some Chinese immigrants. Through to the 1880s, as gold was once more found in Queensland, Chinese immigrants became temporary residents and for the most part returned to China once their wealth had been accumulated. Some did, however, stay behind to pioneer burgeoning Asian communities in Australia. Also emerging at this time: 'racist ideology was becoming fashionable throughout the English-speaking world...expressed in terms of the coming 'race war' between Europeans and Asians' (Jupp, 2004, p.71). In short, the Chinese settlers that arrived for the gold-rush were not seen as welcome additions to the young nation and those that stayed faced much prejudice.

This early distrust of Chinese settlers that came as part of the gold-rushes was perpetuated through the 'teeming hordes' and 'yellow peril' that have been demonised in many ways throughout Australian history. Until as recently as 1961, *The Bulletin*, founded in 1880 and an icon of Australian patriotism, read 'Australia for the White Man' on its masthead. In this publication alone Asians have taken the images of:

A pestiferous insect plague, on Oriental dragon, or a Mongolian octopus whose tentacles wormed into every hallowed Australian institution, a venal usurper of Australian's jobs, and a creeping threat to their wives and daughters. (Broinowski, 1992, p.9)

FitzGerald highlights that this negative stereotyping has even continued far beyond 1961 into the latter part of the twentieth century in demonising of 'the Indonesians' through the East Timor conflict (2002).

This negative stereotyping has had a lasting effect on the Australian psyche and 'anti-Asian prejudice began, as all racism does, with attributing certain characteristics to all Oriental people and, when that became unsustainable, to certain 'types'' (Broinowski, 1992, p.12). The most notorious manifestation of this racism is possibly the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, known more commonly as the White Australia Policy. This act established practices that would last fifty years; practices that allowed the Australian government to achieve a 'White Australia' through 'an international understanding that it was not worth trying to immigrate if unacceptable' (Jupp, 2004, p.75). The life of this act saw more than just immigrations restrictions though – there was internment of Asian immigrants during World War II and the forced repatriation of all Asian wartime refugees in mid 1947 by Arthur Calwell, the Minister of the Department of Immigration at the time who proclaimed that 'we can have a white Australia, we can have a black Australia, but a mongrel Australia is impossible' (in Jordan, 2006, p.231).

There is growing scholarship to suggest that the policy's demise was made possible by an increasing discourse of anti-racism, however Jordan suggests more pragmatic, rather than principled grounds. Jordan (2006) notes much about the growing need to 'avoid alienating Asian and international opinion' (p.232) however 'those responsible for reform...rarely if ever promoted a shift in thinking by invoking high moral principle' (p. 243). If, as Jupp asserts, 'White Australia was an ideology, not just a method of controlling immigration' (2004, p.82), and the motives for making the White Australian Policy defunct were not entirely altruistic, are the legacies of 'White Australia' defunct, or rather dormant for now? The brief popularity of Pauline Hanson and One Nation in 1997, for example, or the Cronulla Riots or more recent racist attacks on Indian students in Melbourne would suggest perhaps the latter, or at least, there is an evident level of xenophobia in public discourse.

In many ways Australia has progressed dramatically from the days of the White Australia policy and despite the legacy of this policy Asian migrants have developed an Asian identity within Australia. As Australians came to terms with the move away from British heritage after the fall of Singapore in World War II, they began to move slowly towards the realisation that they could identify positively with the country's ethnic diversity, and began to look towards Australia as a multicultural society, rather than a homogenous British replica. As Jupp (1995) concludes:

The generation which has grown up since 1945 and which is now starting to dominate politics and intellectual life will find it easier to reorient Australia than did the previous generation, despite continuing ambivalence in public attitudes. The presence in Australia of large numbers of permanent residents and citizens of Asian origin is a necessary factor in expediting change. (p.207)

The White Australia Policy did not 'completely kill off the viable communities which had been created by 1900' (Jupp, 2004, p.78) and there has been clear growth in the percentage of Australians born overseas; from 9.7% in 1947 to 22.6% in 1996 (Jupp, 2004, p.191), not to mention the proliferation of first, second and third generation Australians that add continued cultural diversity to multicultural Australia.

Regardless, migrants find themselves in a precarious situation as:

people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves.

(Rushdie, 1992, p124)

Prejudice, it may seem, still underpins assertions of tolerance and multiculturalism in Australia. Australian multiculturalism is depicted as the major achievement of Australian culture however Curran (2002) suggests that 'multiculturalism may well have offered a new myth of Australian distinctiveness, by virtue of its stark contrast to British racial homogeneity, but it still struggled to offer a new myth of national cohesion' (p. 477). Jayasuriya and Pooking (1999) further add to this debate by suggesting that the racist argument was now stated in terms of 'social cohesion' and 'national unity' (p.82.). Multiculturalism, as the emerging form of nationalism in Australia purported cultural diversity and uniqueness, albeit in a context that still demanded affirmation of the values of the dominant cultural group.

It appeared that the legacy of the White Australia policy and loyalty to the British persevered to some extent in Australian culture making it difficult to intervene, question and challenge the cultural *status quo*. Curran asserts that Former Prime



Minister Bob Hawke clung to the ‘enormous debt we owe to Britain’ and that Keating, the leader of Asia-engagement rhetoric was motivated more by using this rhetoric as a ‘tool to be used in the nationalist struggle against the British’ (2002). On a similar tangent, former Prime minister John Howard identifies the dominant culture as Anglo-Celtic when he states that ‘most nations experience some level of cultural diversity while also having a dominant cultural pattern running through them’ (in Wong, 2007). These political sentiments were echoed in educational spheres when the Fitzgerald Report argued the need for equal status of Asian languages in school curricula only to be met with claims from ‘ethnic and multicultural lobby groups [that] feared that community and European languages would be placed at risk if Asian languages were given parity’ (Henderson, 2003, p.28).

Choi openly challenges the reality and tolerance of this ‘dominant cultural pattern’ with the provocative point that ‘to be tolerated is to endure the knowledge that there is something wrong with you to start with, but that out of the goodness of their hearts, these other people are not going to reject you outright’ (Ling, 2001, p185). Hage adds further fuel to the debate by asserting that in Australian multiculturalism, elements which the host society can easily consume become the defining features of a culture: ‘while the dominant White culture merely and unquestionable exists, migrant cultures exist for the latter. Their value . . . lies in their function as enriching cultures’ (in Kwok, 2004, 5).

Although tenets of Australian society may resist engaging with ‘Asia’ or considering parity with Asian culture it is possible that ‘Asia’ too is resistant to engagement with Australia. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have all evidenced displeasure with Australia in general as published in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1994:

Singapore government controlled press has been used to discredit . . . Australians as ‘lazy bums’ and warned that ‘Australians will have to show greater appreciation of the region’s cultures, history, values, traits, norms, habits . . . to show more sensitivity and not try to foist on their neighbours their European-centred notions’ (in Paul, 1999, p.299).

Clearly, the legacy of a ‘dominant cultural pattern’ is as much a cause for concern for ‘Asia’ as it is for Australian culture itself.

It is a greater appreciation of the Asian region that the current government, under Kevin Rudd’s leadership, is endeavouring to foster as part of their Education Revolution. The tensions of Australia’s historical legacies may be exigent, but, regardless of this, this is the context in which Australia becoming ‘Asia literate’ is positioned. Said himself offers hope that ‘Orientalism need not always be so unchallenged, intellectually, ideologically, and politically, as it has been’ (2003, p.326). The Australian context offers challenges intellectually, ideologically and politically, and it is to this end that Rudd seems to be reinvigorating ‘Asia’ engagement in educational contexts. The ‘Asia’ that Rudd seeks to strengthen ties with enjoys a different power relationship of the past ‘Asia’. This is an ‘Asia’ that is seen as the location of the next great ‘superpower’ and a key site to Australia alleviating its economic position in light of the recent economic downturn.

Henderson points out that:

since Asian studies involved values and beliefs about the nation’s future direction, it was inextricably linked with other questions about Australian identity . . . it was in this sense that Asian studies was

problematised along with debates about multiculturalism. (2008, p.177-178)

In light of the problematic idea of 'Asia', and Australia's repositioning and reframing of its economic and political relationship with 'Asia', it is clear that there is potential diversity in ideas about what Asian studies will actually look like in Australian schools.

### **Asia Literacy: Repositioning and Reframing 'Asia'**

In Rudd's incarnation, 'Asia literacy' has been predominantly couched in economic, rather than intellectual or cultural terms. The utilitarian aims of the policy are clear, even from Rudd's earliest dalliances with 'Asia literacy' as the Opposition Foreign Affairs Minister and the Chair of the Council of Australian Governments' report *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future* (in fact, this report is also known as the 'Rudd Report'). In this report he stated that 'Australia requires an export culture which is 'Asia literate': i.e. one which possesses the range of linguistic and cultural competencies required by Australians to operate effectively...with the region' (1994, p.ii). The current Minister for Education echoed this economic focus in her speech to the Asia Education Foundation in Melbourne in May 2008 when she reinforced the 2020 Summit calls for Australia to develop 'a comprehensive, cross-agency, national strategic plan for a major reinvigoration of Asia literacy in Australia, to enhance our global engagement in trade, security and people to people exchanges'. The economic agenda extends from political to business arenas as well. *The Statement of the Business Alliance for Asia Literacy* states that 'Australia's future depends not only on our economic success but on our ability to solve fundamentally global problems' (AEF, 2009).

The question of how 'Asia' can be an economic link to Australia has been further heightened by the recent economic downturn as Sid Myer, chairman of Asialink stressed 'the question everyone is asking is: 'Can Asia cushion Australia from the shocks? So far as there is growth, the IMF forecasts it will be in Asia' (quoted in Callick, 2009). Despite claims of intellectual study, it seems the majority of dialogue surrounding 'Asia literacy' of late is economic, which could have an adverse effect if this dialogue filters into school studies, seeing a possible emphasis on the emerging economic power of India and China, to the detriment of other dynamic countries and characteristics of the region. The competing economic agenda could potentially foster 'Asia literacy' that is fiscal in focus, directly contradicting calls for:

understanding the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and possessing the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally. (AEF, 2006, p.3)

More recently, *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, released in December 2008, mandated that 'Australians need to become 'Asia literate' (p.4) and 'be able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia' (p.9). So far, these references in the declaration are the closest 'Asia literacy' has become to being part of 'national action plan to implement the *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*' (AEF, 2006), as called for by the *Call to Action: Asia literacy for every young Australian* in May 2008.

The national statement was created in light of calls for active and informed citizens in the wider global context in *The Adelaide Declaration of National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*, released in 1999. The statement is underpinned by five learning emphases for schooling young people to:

- Understand 'Asia'
- Develop informed attitudes and values
- Know about contemporary and traditional Asia
- Connect Australia and Asia, and
- Communicate [interculturally and in Asian languages]. (AEF, 2006)

To 'Understand Asia' it is stated that students will be able to explain the term 'Asia' and the diversity of the region and its importance to other countries in the world, particularly Australia in terms of geography, history, culture and economy (AEF, 2006, p.8). This, in light of earlier discussions of the complexities of the term 'Asia', should serve to challenge Orientalist and static definitions of 'Asia'.

Similarly, asking students to 'develop informed attitudes and values' that look at plurality, interdependence and commonality of humanity and critically analyse and respond to stereotyped views of Asian peoples, cultures, societies and organisations (AEF, 2006, p.8) ought to further extend definitions of 'Asia' as well as serve to break down some of the popular legacies of the White Australia ideology that exist in Australian history. This should also serve to challenge more conservative notions of nationalism, if the development of attitudes and values are in fact approached with informed critical reflection.

The latter three emphases, however, could pose some problems in terms of current dialogue surrounding 'Asia'. To 'know about contemporary and traditional Asia' and understand contemporary Asia, including significant contributions to world development and knowledge (AEF, 2006, p.9) could see the replacement of old stereotypes with new ones as bustling cities potentially take the places of rice paddies in the imaginations of Australian students, fuelled by economic concerns. There seems to be much promotion, in the media and government releases, of a shift towards thinking about 'Asia' by these economic concerns, rather than an intellectual exploration of contemporary and traditional 'Asia'.

By the same token, to 'Connect Australia and Asia', to understand current trends and be familiar with the history of Australia-Asia engagement, including contributions made by Australians of Asian heritage (AEF, 2006, p.9) could be increasingly problematic considering the growing economic dialogue surrounding the current attention paid to 'Asia' in the Australian media and by Australian politicians. A narrow focus on business connections alone would be detrimental to intellectual Australia-Asia engagement. In a keynote address to the Asia Education Foundation National Forum for Leading 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools, Milner asserted that 'the best strategy now for enhancing the 'Asia' focus...will not be a matter of crowding the curriculum with 'Asia' material, but to tell the 'Australia story' in a manner that connects 'Australia' and 'Asia' more strongly', but in a way that 'would continually highlight Australia, and Australian society'. Additionally, historical stereotypes will need to be explored to discover what constraints, if any, this may have placed on contributions made by Australians of Asian heritage. This latter point will require much sensitivity and critical reflection on more conservative Australian perspectives



in order to challenge demonised images of 'Asia' that frequent the Australian historical imagination.

Finally, 'Communicate', including intercultural skills and Asian languages (AEF, 2006, p.9) is clearly problematic in light of figures in the *Call to Action: Asia literacy for every young Australian* that 'less than 25% of our students have the opportunity to study an Asian language' (AEF, 2008). While the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program seeks to increase opportunities for intercultural learning, the 'aspirational target' is that by 2020, at least 12 percent of students will exit Year 12 with fluency in one of the target Asian languages of Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean (2009, p.3). The indication of an 'aspirational target' frames widespread engagement with the communication emphasis as more of a tentative 'hope' or 'wish' than a definite objective.

While this does not serve to be an exhaustive analysis of *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*, it does serve to highlight the potential and possible points of tension surrounding this document. Some of these tension points have already been highlighted in the *Shape Paper Consultation Report* (2009) which presents feedback on the 2008 document *The Shape of the National Curriculum: A Proposal for Discussion*. The goal to ensure all Australian students become Asia literate was clearly affirmed and feedback suggested Asian languages and cultures need to be a focus in content of all learning areas.

Feedback also suggested that 'Asia literacy' be included as a principle to underpin curriculum and specifications for curriculum development. The National Curriculum Board's response to this was to *consider* [author's own italics] the inclusion of 'Asia literacy' as a general capability. While there is clear progress here towards a plan for including studies of 'Asia' in key learning areas of the National Curriculum, the *consideration*, and possibly hesitation, over the inclusion of 'Asia literacy' is concerning. As a concept that also embraces a theory of cultural literacy and education, if, after consideration, a decision was made not to include it, it could potentially see a superficial, selective or even Orientalist approach to the study of 'Asia' result, rather than one that affords a more balanced study of Asian culture. As an underpinning curriculum principle 'Asia literacy' would have a much better chance of ensuring that the study of 'Asia' is embedded intellectually in all aspects of education and considered a fundamental facet of Australian education. Furthermore there are the considerations of the impact of globalisation on the understanding of 'Asia' as a discrete entity as it serves to promote a global community, potentially above and beyond the regional community that the Australia-Asia focus implies.

### **Where to from here?**

It is not the *why* of 'Asia literacy' that is implicated here, but rather the *how*. It would be foolish to assume that just because the legitimacy of the call for 'Asia literacy' is clear, that schools will simply be able to start making it happen. It has been implemented quite successfully in a number of school contexts over the years, however the hard reality is, as AEF states, 'that no education system explicitly requires schools to teach about the Asian region, data indicates that 50% of our schools are not equipped to teach about Asia...[and] there is no plan to ensure the Asia literacy of new teachers' (2008). Situate this reality in the complex and somewhat tainted history of Australia's engagement with Asia and the waters quickly become murky. Globalisation contributes further concerns to the development of a

national identity with the pervasive commingling of cultures, languages, images, practices and identity markers.

Australia, however, as has been noted, is not necessarily resilient when its national identity is challenged. Further, a neo-liberal globalisation agenda is also a major factor of consideration in the articulation of 'Asia literacy'. Alternatively, Eckersley (2007) defines globalisation as a multifaceted process that breaks down the significance of borders. Said (2003) raises some pertinent questions for consideration:

How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilisation) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (where one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')? Do cultural, religious and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones? How do ideas acquire authority, 'normality', and even the status of 'natural truth'? (p.325-326).

Perhaps a breakdown of cultural borders is precisely what Australia needs.

In Australia, the call for 'Asia literacy' offers distinct challenges and opportunities:

- How can we represent the regions and nation-states of 'Asia' as distinct cultures, without creating 'others' as our cultural legacy tends to do, and in a way that does not devalue 'Asia' in global contexts? Here is our opportunity to breathe breadth and complexity into the study of 'Asia' in Australian schools.
- Can we overcome categories that are applied to Australia's engagement with 'Asia' – is it a matter of moral principle or pragmatic foreign policy? Are we framing the studies of 'Asia' intellectually or economically, or both? Is this the ideal opportunity to open up dialogue on the ideological lenses through which 'Asia' is seen, to foster critical reflection in our students?
- Ensure that 'Asia literacy' acquires authority, even 'normality' in educational contexts? Fitzgerald (2002) laments that Asian studies were never about 'replacing the Western – but about making a place alongside it for Asia by broadening the cultural horizons and changing the intellectual universe of Australians'. If the AEF figures in the Call to Action are anything to go by, the challenge at the moment is not so much about 'making a place alongside', but intervening in existing curriculum to just make a place, any place, to consider 'Asia', and all its complex conceptualisations, in the school curriculum. Is this, at the dawn of a national curriculum, the golden opportunity to refashion the Australian curriculum in an 'Asia literate' way?

Clearly, the *how* of providing an Asia literate framework to underpin a refashioning the Australian curriculum is a task that requires further and careful consideration. Tensions of this task abound as rather 'selective' representations of 'Asia' have far-reaching implications on inter-cultural understanding within Australia and with other countries.

Recent calls for prioritising languages, backed by statements such as *The Statement of the Business Alliance for Asia Literacy* appear to further justify economic motives. Griffith Asia Institute's *Building an Asia –Literate Australia: An Australian Strategy for Asian Language Proficiency* report (2009) focuses on Asian language teaching and study in Australia as a key to promoting discussion of Asia literacy, however this too is embedded in economic discussion; rationalising a major program of spending amidst financial crisis as 'the world of the future is going to be an Asian-centred knowledge economy, and essential to getting ahead in the economy is...being able to speak to people in languages other than English' (Wesley in Healy, 2009), The construction of recent attacks on Indian students in Melbourne as racially motivated form another pertinent and problematic representation in Australia at the present time, particularly with the attacks framed as assaults on Australia fourth largest export industry (Ahmed, 2009) . Whilst the economic implications are central to Asia literacy, in curricular reform, how the heralding of 'Asia literacy' responds to the tensions of 'white Australia' and enhances inter-cultural understanding within Australia can also contribute to its overall strategic international economic intent.

#### **Notes:**

1. Currently, Australian immigration policy aims to meet four major objectives:
  1. To allow reuniting of close relatives with those already legally admitted to Australia;
  2. To bring in skills, assets and educated people;
  3. To fulfil international obligations to accept refugees; and
  4. To permit free access from New Zealand. (Jupp, 2004, p186)

A program weighted more towards skill migration is a more favourable avenue for the Australian Government to take as researchers show that migrants entering Australia in the skill stream outperform those in the family and humanitarian streams with higher labour force participation rates, lower unemployment rates and higher incomes and occupational status (Ho, 2006).

#### **References:**

Ahmed, Tanveer. (2009). Value in our school of hard knocks. *The Australian*. June 2, 2009.

Australian Education Foundation (AEF) Advisory Board. (2008). Call to Action: Asia literacy for every young Australian. *AEF National Forum*, Adelaide 19-20 Mat 2008.

Australian Education Foundation. (2006). *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*. Carlton; Curriculum Corporation, 2.

Australian Education Foundation (AEF) (2009) *The Statement of the Business Alliance for Asia Literacy* Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> May 2009, from:  
[http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/21407/BusinessAllianceforAsiaLiteracy.pdf](http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0014/21407/BusinessAllianceforAsiaLiteracy.pdf)

Broinowski, A. (1992). *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Callick, R. (2009) Study of Asia fails our need to know. *The Australian*, May 6 2009.

Curran, J. (2002). The 'thin dividing line': prime ministers and the problem of Australian nationalism. *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 48(4), pp469-487.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2008). *National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program: Program Guidelines 2009-2011*. Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> April 2009, from:  
[http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NALSSP/Documents/b09\\_019\\_NALSSP\\_Guidelines\\_06.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/NALSSP/Documents/b09_019_NALSSP_Guidelines_06.pdf)

Eckersley, R. (2007). Teaching and learning about globalisation. *Ethos*. 15(1), pp.10-18.

FitzGerald, S. (2002). *Australia's Relations with Asia: Scholars, Practitioners and the Lost Debate (Words for a book launch)*. MIALS-Asialink Seminar, Melbourne, 17 April 2002.

Gillard, J. (2008). *Leading 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Engage with Asia Forum*, speech to the Asia Education Foundation, Melbourne. Retrieved 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2009, from  
[http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article\\_081009\\_114323.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_081009_114323.aspx)

Healy, G. (2009). Future depends on Asian languages. *The Australian*, June 10, 2009.

Henderson, D. (2003). Meeting the national interest through Asia literacy – an overview of the major stages and debate. *Asian Studies Review*, 27(1), 23-53.

Henderson, D. (2008). Politics and Policy-making for Asia Literacy: The Rudd Report and a National Strategy in Australian Education. *Asian Studies Review*, 32, pp.171-195.

Ho, C. 2006. 'Migration as Feminisation? Chinese Women's experiences of Work and Family in Australia' in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32(3): 497-514.

Jayasuriya, L & Pookong, K. (1999). *The Asianisation of Australia*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Jordan, M. (2006). The reappraisal of the White Australia policy against the background of a changing Asia. *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 52(2), pp224-244.

Jupp, J. (1995). From 'White Australia' to 'part of Asia': Recent shifts in Australian immigration policy towards the region. *The International Migration Review*. 29 (1). Pp207.

Jupp, J. (2004). *Immigration*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Kwok, J. (2004). *The Strategic Utility of 'Chineseness' in the Political Cultures of Diasporic Chinese Communities: Some Preliminary Thoughts*. Presented at the UQ Australian Studies conference 'The Body Politic' in Brisbane, 24-26 November.

Ling, C. (ed) (2001). *Plantings in a new land*. Society of Chinese Australian Academics of Queensland, Brisbane.

Milner, A. (2009). Keynote address, Asia Education Foundation National Forum: 'Leading 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools', Hyatt Hotel, Canberra, 25 August 2009.

Milner, A. & Johnson, D. (2002). *The Idea of Asia*. Faculty of Asian Studies. Retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2009, from <http://dspace-prod1.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/41891/1/idea.html>.

Muller, W & Wong, M. (1991). *Asian Studies in Queensland Schools*, paper prepared for the Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum.

National Curriculum Board. (2009). *Shape Paper Consultation Report*. Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> May, 2009, from [http://www.ncb.org.au/verve/resources/Shape\\_Paper\\_consultation\\_report.pdf](http://www.ncb.org.au/verve/resources/Shape_Paper_consultation_report.pdf)

Paul, E. (1999). Australia and Southeast Asia: Regionalisation, democracy and conflict. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 29(3), pp.285-308.

Rizvi, F. (1997). Beyond the East-West Divide: Education and the Dynamics of Australia-Asia Relations. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 24 (1), 13-26.

Rudd, K. (Chair) (1994). *Asian Languages and Australia's economic future*. A Report Prepared for the Council of Australian Governments on a Proposed National Asian Languages/Studies Strategy for Australian Schools (Brisbane: Queensland Government Printer).

Rudd, P. (2008). Quality Education: The Case for an Education Revolution in Our Schools, Address to the National Press Club, Canberra. Retrieved 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2008, from [http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech\\_0443.cfm](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0443.cfm)

Rushdie, S. (1992). *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta Books, London.

Ryckmans, Pierre. (1993). 'Some thoughts on Asian Studies' in J. Beaumont (ed.), *Where to now? Australia's Identity in the Nineties*, Federation Press, Leichhardt, NSW/

Said, E. (1978/1991) *Orientalism*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Viswanathan, G. (editor) (2002). *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*. Vintage Books, New York.

Wong, P. 2007. *Speech to the Second Asian Identities Conference*. Melbourne, Friday June 29.