

Kathe Kirby

Excellence and equity: looking inwards, looking outwards

“... the next divide in Australia will be between those students who have a global outlook and an international language and those who do not.”

National Forum: Engaging Young Australians with Asia, Asia Education Foundation, May 2007

Fazal Rizvi has asked us: ‘how should we re-think issues of curriculum so that they are better aligned to the new realities of the 21st century?’ ‘New realities’ shaped by rapidly increasing global interconnectivity.

I want to take up Fazal’s challenge and identify what I consider to be some of the essential skills, knowledge and understandings of a 21st century *cosmopolitan* curriculum. And I want to take bearings of where we are in Australia right now in achieving this.

Almost every educational system in the world right now maintains that curriculum must become more responsive to the compelling requirements of globalisation.

The report, *Learning in a Global Age : Knowledge and Skills for a Flat World, Asia Society June 2007* was generated at a US-initiated summit held in China last year to see what US and Asian educators agreed were core knowledge and skills for the ‘flat world’ - the term coined by US journalist Thomas Friedman in his book of the same name. The report says: *“In the flat world, where everything is interconnected, the ability to be adaptable and innovative **and to communicate effectively across cultures** will be essential to individual and national success.”*

Like other countries, we are familiar in Australia with new curriculum statements: “responding to globalisation,” creating a “globally outward curriculum,” providing “skills and understandings for the 21st century” are common in our documents.

Federalist Paper Number 2 on the *Future of Schooling in Australia* (April 2007) has the latest go at defining what this might look like. Alongside the (by now well-known) “21st century skill set” of literacy, numeracy, science, creativity, technology and team work, it’s encouraging to see, “intercultural engagement, communication and understanding.”

But what does it mean to be inter-culturally competent today? Exactly what skills are required? What knowledge? What understandings? And *which* cultures do we need to know about and understand? Any cultures? Or are there priorities?

What are the implications for teachers and schools seeking to equip our students to be inter-culturally competent?

These are the questions I would like to focus on today.

“Asia is now the region of the world whose current emergence is one of history’s greatest catalysts for worldwide change. Australians require new skills, knowledge and understanding related to the Asian region and Australia’s engagement with Asia in order to meet the challenges and opportunities of living and working in the 21st century”.

National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools, MCEETYA, 2005

It struck Friedman that the world was flat after visiting Bangalore - the Silicon Valley of India and fast becoming the data bank of the world. Here, as sacred cows wandered between McDonalds and Microsoft, Friedman asks himself: is this the new world, the old world or the next world? For educators everywhere he poses the challenge: is an education predominantly focused on western learning and traditions adequate for the 21st century?

The point I want to inject into the curriculum debate in Australia about schooling for the 21st century is that both broad and in-depth knowledge of the cultures, histories, geographies and languages of our neighbouring countries in the Asian region have to be central to equipping our young people for their world.

I don’t want to spend time on the *rationale* for this - it seems obvious.

Five year olds starting school in Australia this year will be at the peak of their working lives in 2040 when China and India are once again set to become the world’s largest economies.

The countries of Asia already account for more than half the world’s population. And half of that number is under 25 years-of-age. They are our children’s contemporaries: their future business partners, their workmates, bosses, customers, clients and, if we are lucky and play our cards well, their friends.

This year The Age newspaper had a feature article on young Australian architect, James Brearley, who is now working in Shanghai. And by the way, around 30 % of Australian architectural practice is now located in the Asian region. Think for a moment about what knowledge, skills and understandings James Brearley might need in Shanghai. To design appropriate buildings he would need some knowledge of Chinese traditional aesthetic and of China’s contemporary culture and its environment. Cross-cultural communication skills would be essential if he was to direct a workforce or liaise with government departments. And imagine the power of speaking the language... Especially given that Mandarin Chinese is now the most widely spoken language in the world.

However, its unlikely James would speak Chinese as only 900 Australian university students were enrolled in Mandarin last year¹ - with the likelihood that most of these were Chinese background speakers if patterns follow that of Year 12 enrolments where a mere 2.1 % of Australian students take Mandarin.

¹ Total enrolments in Chinese were 1800 but 50% of these enrolments are from international students studying in Australian universities.

If James were at school in Australia today, how confident are we that he would emerge from his schooling with even a base for these skills and understandings?

This is a critical point in the context of the current view that Australia's most important economic resource to succeed in the global knowledge economy is the capacity of our people - our human capital.

And we live in the Asian region.

Within 10 years, China's carbon emissions alone are predicted to equal that of all the OECD countries together plus the rest of Europe and the Pacific region combined. There's been debate in this election campaign that 'climate change' will replace 'security' as the focus of our future foreign policy. Our environment - and therefore our health, our security - is inter-dependent with the countries of Asia. Such a future demands that young people **at school today** need to develop the skills to work collaboratively with our neighbours. They need not just the scientific know how - but also the cultural knowledge and skills - to work together to develop solutions.

'Good neighbours learn to speak each others languages... Good neighbours learn to respect each other's religious and cultural beliefs. Good neighbours learn to allow for differences and to be inclusive. Good neighbours spend time with each other. Good neighbours understand that contentious issues should be resolved through negotiation'.

General Peter Cosgrove
National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools

We're not doing too well at the moment with our closest neighbor, Indonesia - the world's largest Muslim country and third largest democracy.

As the 2007 Lowy Institute Poll on Australian public opinion indicates, we group Indonesia with Israel, Iraq and Iran in terms of our feelings towards other countries. Last year the Australian Catholic University surveyed students in one state as to their attitudes to Muslims. Over 80% viewed "all Muslims as terrorists". In 2006 only 400 students were enrolled in Indonesian at an Australian university - reflecting the decline in Indonesian in our schools where 1% take Bahasa Indonesia in Year 12. Fewer than 3% of Australian university students and only 6% of Year 12 students, study an Asian language today.

Encouragingly Australian parents are of the view 'that Australians need to understand China at least as well as they understand Britain and the USA.' The Asia Education Foundation has worked in partnership with the Australian Council of State School Organizations and the Australian Parents Council since 2004 with our first collaboration a scoping survey of the views of parents on the importance of studying about Asia. 91% of the parents surveyed believed that an ability to communicate across cultures was an important skill for all Australians.

I want to turn now to a quick scan of what's being done to support our children to be Asia-literate.

In November 2005, all Federal, State and Territory Ministers of Education endorsed the *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools*. The *National Statement* articulates what knowledge, skills and understandings an Asia-engaged young Australian should gain through their schooling.

The Statement identifies that students should be able to:

- Understand the diversity of Asia and its global importance
- Develop informed attitudes and values about Asian peoples, events, issues and lifestyles
- Know about contemporary and traditional Asia
- Recognize the connections between Australia and Asia, and
- Be able to communicate through language and intercultural understandings.

Each of these headings is then further elaborated on.

'Understand the diversity of Asia' describes what students would optimally know, understand and be able to do to achieve this, including: explaining what the term 'Asia' means, with references to geography, history, culture and the economy.

I want to draw on The Arts to show what this might mean in a classroom.

Artwork by West Australian artist Robin Best is part of an exhibition which positions Australian ceramics within European and Asian ceramic histories. The artist has had a number of working residencies in China through the support of the Australian Government, where she observed the influence of Chinese porcelain on European traditions including Delft ware and the French *Chinoiserie*. She became interested in the ideas of cross-pollination and her series *In China We Trust* illustrates the cultural, commercial and political history of China and its relations with the West.

The curriculum activities inspired by this work can have students look at Robin's artworks from a personal perspective or in terms of cultural influences: past history and contemporary issues. They can look at the structural properties of the artworks that might inspire their own art making or from an ideas perspective: the connection between Eastern and Western cultures, and Australia's role in this. They can look at other artists in the exhibition, like Gerry Wedd's *Thong Cycle* - prompted by notions of cultural identity and certain peoples being called *un-Australian*.

Through study of these images, students can learn art history, art appreciation and art making. And they can learn about Asia...and about Australia.

Including content related to Asia in curriculum is not adding to the 'crowded curriculum'. This is core arts curriculum relevant to Australians in the 21st century.

The National Statement identifies six interlinked elements necessary for its take-up by systems and schools:

1. Studies of Asia and Australia are included in course content across the curriculum.
2. All schools have access to high quality curriculum resources
3. Teachers are engaged in continuing development of their knowledge, understandings and skills to support studies of Asia
4. A continuing program of promotion and information enables schools to engage parents and the wider school community

5. Teacher training programs prepare new teachers to support studies of Asia in schools
6. And education systems and schools monitor and review their progress in student achievement in Asia-related knowledge, understandings and attitudes.

The AEF, through Curriculum Corporation, has developed the *Asia Scope and Sequences for English, Studies of Society and Environment* and *The Arts* to support curriculum planners to include an Asia focus in new curriculum guides.

In a 2007 Report to AESOC on the progress of take-up of the *National Statement Engaging Young Australians with Asia*, state and territory systems reported that one of the key factors that had assisted take-up were the Asia Scope and Sequence documents. These had informed curriculum review at the system level and provided exemplar support materials to assist implementation of new curriculum guidelines.

However, the two most common factors identified in the Report to AESOC as **inhibiting** take-up included:

- 1- The lack of an explicit requirement in any jurisdiction to include content on Asia in the classroom curriculum - a critical factor in the context of a competitive curriculum agenda.** The last time national data was collected to monitor inclusion of studies of Asia was 2002. At that time 50% of Australian school children had either minimal or no content related to Asia in their curriculum.

And this, in the context of the second key factor that has inhibited take-up:

- 2- Declining funding to support teacher professional learning to deepen teacher knowledge and understandings of Asia.**

You can't teach what you know little about and the majority of Australian teachers have had little education themselves about Asia.

We agree we have to really invest in building teaching capacity to improve literacy and numeracy standards and we are doing this. But achieving the required levels of intercultural competency for the 21st century simply won't happen without a significant investment in teacher professional learning.

Principals are key change agents in leading their schools to equip their students with a 21st century skill set. Over 2008 and 2009 the AEF will work with all primary and secondary principals' associations on a national strategy to engage school leaders with Asia. Funded by the Australian Government, and operating in partnership with principals and systems, the strategy will build a strong cohort of Asia focused school leaders and provide seed funding to schools to plan and implement new curriculum.

We know that change on this scale is a long-term, complex process. It requires both grassroots and policy initiatives with support all round - including high quality curriculum materials and professional learning opportunities.

This work in Australia to include skills, knowledge and understandings about Asia through infusion across the curriculum - or through an increased priority on Asian languages - is also occurring in other Western countries - and not only those located in geographical proximity to Asia.

The US has a current major focus on Mandarin Chinese in schools. In the UK Dearing Report (March 2007) outlines that: "Languages to be compulsory for all seven-year-olds from 2010; 90% of all 14-year-olds to study a language from 2010; Range of languages to include Mandarin and Urdu" The Asia NZ Foundation is working with the NZ Ministry of Education to target school principals, after the data gathered in their 2006 Asia Knowledge Report showed little understanding about engagement with Asia in New Zealand schools. "We face a choice, adapt or get left behind" said the report. In Europe, the Spanish Government has established the School of Bamboo strategy.

My final point is this:

The Engaging Asia Statement builds on a long-term national collaborative strategy to include content about Asia in Australian school curriculum. A collaboration of government, catholic and independent schools in all states and territories - working in partnership with the Australian government and the national Asia Education Foundation - and supported by peak principal and parent organizations, by teacher professional associations, by deans of education, and by Asian studies experts in our universities.

This is surely a huge and remarkable strength on which we can build. But to achieve intercultural competency for our children, including knowledge and understandings related to Asia, we need to ensure we move beyond the rhetoric of curriculum documents. It requires significant and sustained investment in our teaching force. And it won't occur without the commitment of all Australian governments to ensure that our curriculum frameworks are clear about this.

'It is our shared vision that by 2020 we will live in an Australia in which our children can speak with respect and knowledge about Islam; an Australia that can communicate with its nearest neighbour - Indonesia; an Australia that can take up the opportunities offered by the economic powerhouses of China and India. An Australia in which a unique, vibrant, creative culture has blossomed, a culture that understands its indigenous connectedness to land and is fed as much by the influences of the great civilizations of Asia as by those of Europe'.
Carrillo Gantner, National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools.

"The voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

Marcel Proust

As educators our task is to open our children's eyes.

The first task is to be clear about what 'new eyes' our children require to know and understand the realities of *their* world.

Our children have to gain from their schooling a base of knowledge and understandings about the countries, cultures and societies of our own neighborhood - the Asian region.

This is not about 'Asian-ising the curriculum'; it's about 'Australian-ising' it for the 21st century.

Thank you.