

Constructing Asia Literacy as a Policy Problem

Rebecca Cairns

Deakin University

Australia-Asia relations represent an ongoing public policy question with a long and vexed history. In education, studies of Asia have been a national policy concern since the early 1970s. Responding to shifts in the economic and geo-political landscape, a consistent flow of policies and governmental reports argued that it was in the national interest to promote Asian languages and studies of Asia in Australian schools (see Auchmuty, 1970; Aust. Gov., 2012; FitzGerald & Drysdale, 1980; Garnaut, 1989; Ingelson, 1989; MCEETYA, 2008; Rudd, 1994; Scully, 1986). Based largely on instrumentalist rationales, these policies exhorted young Australians to become 'Asia literate.' With its focus on knowledge of "histories" of "the diverse countries of Asia" (AEF, 2011, p. 2) Asia literacy has been aligned with the subject of History in particular. The research project to which this analysis contributes, examines how Asia and Asia-related histories are imagined and constructed through Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) History curriculum policy processes. It takes up the concern that problematic policy constructions of Asia literacy have implications for the ways in which senior secondary History curricula have engaged with Asia-related histories. A brief overview of the powerful instrumental discourse by which this area of policy is sustained is presented here.

Asia literacy, or lack thereof, has been perceived to be a problem to be addressed by policy for sometime, although it has only recently found a curricular foothold in the new Australian Curriculum. The historical foundations of a long and equivocal relationship between Australia and the imagined 'Asian Other' means "the call to Asia literacy therefore forms a much longer history in which knowing Asia is positioned as a critical test for the Australian nation" (Walker, 2015, p. 30). The requirement that all young Australians become Asia literate is articulated by Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia cross-curriculum priority. The Australian Curriculum states, "Asia literacy provides students with the skills to communicate and engage with the peoples of Asia so they can effectively live, work and learn in the region" (ACARA, 2014). Despite Australia's rich immigration histories and diverse population, the long-held assumption is that young people do not possess such skills and, in order for Australia to succeed in the region, curriculum policy should address this deficit. The coupling of the Asia priority with the intercultural capability, one of seven general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum, would suggest that the desired outcome is essentially one of intercultural enrichment and interconnection. However, when the rationales of various Asia literacy policies are examined, Asia as an educational policy concern has chiefly been framed by an

instrumentalist rationale that has viewed the problem of Asia literacy as an economic and strategic one.

Two distinct rationales have presented alternative framings for the Asia literacy policy 'problem', driving the type of policy resources made available. The dominant instrumental approach initiates a utilitarian rationale for Asia literacy and is often focused on increasing the uptake of the study of Asian languages – i.e. those of Australia's key trading partners – or learning about Asia in order for young Australians to become more competitive and productive citizens. Grounded in the economic rationalism of the 1980s and 1990s, and the need to “seize the opportunities of the Asian century” (Gillard, 2012, p. iii) more recently, the instrumental rationale places the national interest and economic growth at the heart of Australia-Asia engagement. In other words, Asia is coveted as Asia-as-market (Martin et al., 2015). In tension with this opportunistic positioning is the cultural rationale, which advocates a more humanist purpose for studies of Asia across the curriculum. The cultural approach is more directed to developing social capital in order to further intercultural understanding. While the two rationales are not mutually exclusive, they are indicative of competing ideological frictions. The growing potency of instrumentalism was flagged in the late 1980s. Although the Asian Studies Association (ASA) continued to “welcome any attempts by the government to make Asian studies more responsive to Australia's marketplace requirements in Asia” (1988, p. 11), it also argued that this be balanced with the intellectual and philosophical goals of studies of Asia in order to “maintain its integrity” (1988, p. 16). Negotiating this balance has been an ongoing challenge for Asia literacy proponents and the availability of federal funding has tended to be at its highest when the instrumental rationale has reverberated in government policy and rhetoric.

While there are many examples that illustrate the extent to which Asia literacy is anchored in economism, a clear expression of the rhetoric of self-interest was evident in the policies of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, (Hawke, 1988; Henderson, 2008; Pan, 2013). Seeking to position Asia literacy in line with the government's macroeconomic reforms, the Keating government ended decades of inertia by providing some concrete resources in the form of two significant federal government policy initiatives (Henderson, 2008). The first was the establishment of the Asia Education Foundation (AEF), which was provided with \$3.5 million in funding to promote studies of Asia. The second was the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools Strategy, or NALSAS strategy, which was a product of the *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future* (Rudd, 1994), or *Rudd Report*. Bipartisan support for the *Rudd Report* was unprecedented, although NALSAS funding was eventually terminated under the Howard government (Henderson, 2008). Interestingly, it was during this peak in Asia literacy funding in the mid 1990s that the only stand-alone Asian History units ever were offered in the VCE, from which only the histories of Australia's key trading partners could be selected for study.

The argument that policy constructions of Asia and Asia literacy are problematic is not new, however, its persistent problematisation means it requires further scrutiny. Despite decades of critical and postcolonial perspectives on Asia literacy, this policy area remains a troublesome feature of the national education agenda. The ongoing contestation of Asia literacy policy is an indication of the ways it has been poorly implemented and understood (Rizvi, 2013); indeed it remains a wicked policy problem (Halse, 2015). The continued dominance of the instrumentalist discourse that propels Asia literacy, and the purpose of schooling more generally, has had implications for the orientation of various VCE History curricula. My thesis examines these complexities. When public policy history is coupled with a critical analysis of curriculum design and enactment there is potential to better understand the complexities of policy processes and to challenge distorted constructions of a critical policy problem, namely Asia literacy.

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