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The problem in policy: representations of Asia literacy in Australian education for the Asian Century.

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategic arguments articulated in calls for the teaching and learning of Asia in schools. 'Asia literacy' is currently framed as a necessary 'solution' for Australian education, but acceptance of this 'solution' into the mainstream educational policy agenda has been problematised as a neo-liberal and neo-colonial construct. Subsequent policy debate indicates the dominance of an economic rationale that is seemingly impossible to resist. This paper suggests that critical policy approaches can be used to identify alternatives to these dominant frameworks, and which imagine Asia literacy in alternate ways. Re-imagining the 'solution' offers three alternatives: working within an economic agenda; restructuring Asia literacy away from a distinct policy agenda; and treating policy gaps as spaces in which teachers can generate locally relevant possibilities.

Keywords

Asia literacy, education policy, Australia-Asia, Orientalism, economic agendas

Introduction

Asia literacy¹ is currently framed as a requisite for the Australian education system. A special report in *The Australian*, May 21, 2010 stated that "it's vitally important Australians become more Asia-literate" linking it to "our [Australia's] education needs both now and into the future".² This imperative is reflected in the emerging National Curriculum, which includes "Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia" as a cross-curriculum priority (ACARA, 2010, p. 20), to be enacted as curriculum policy nationwide.

On September 28 2011 key events simultaneously reinforced and destabilised this need. Firstly, the Australian Education Foundation (AEF) announced the release of its *National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools 2011-2012*, which had been provided to the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee for noting. This statement is prefaced with a reference from the *Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians*, claiming "Australians need to become 'Asia Literate'" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). Secondly, Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the commissioning of the White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century*. The terms of reference for this paper include: "opportunities for a significant deepening of our engagement with Asia across the board, including ... education" (2011, p. 1). Finally, and in contrast to the above, Education Minister Peter Garrett announced the last round of funding under

¹ The term 'Asia' is widely acknowledged to have definitional problems. In this paper where the term Asia is used, it should always be read as if written between quotation marks (Broinowski, 1992; Singh, 1996b), such is the plethora of possible definitions. The term 'Asia literate' should also be read this way. I take the term 'Asia literate' to encompass a complex endeavour of studies of Asia that encompasses both Asia and "cultural literacy" (Muller, 2006; Muller & Wong, 1991), recognising that static and singular notions of Asia and Asian culture are inadequate (Broinowski, 1992; Rizvi, (1997).

² Learning Asia: Preparing for the Asian Century (Special Advertising Report). *The Australian*, 21 May 2010, pp. 1-6.

the four-year *National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program* (NALSSP). There was a disparity in the elements of this chain of events that indicates that despite a strong push forward and some noted achievements, there is ambivalence in the call for Asia literacy.

This ambivalence can be explored through the construction of the idea of Asia literacy – heralded as the fix for Australia’s needs, yet still struggling to fulfil its purpose within Australia’s educational agenda. To a certain extent, the positioning of Asia literacy in policy is “creative” of the problem rather than “reactive” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 211) to it in its construction of a perceived problematic gap in Asia literate knowledge that threatens Australia’s prosperous future; to which Asia literacy is offered, and therefore justified, as the ‘solution’. The primary form of the problem/solution identified in literature on this field is that this representation projects Asia literacy as a “neo-colonial project which aspires to understand the object of Australia’s economic desires” (Singh, 1995b, p. 9). A reductionist economic rationale is used to engage with Asia, positioning Asia as the Other that must be subjugated in order to secure Australia’s future trade and industry. Certainly, the “whole notion of ‘policy’ rests upon a presumption that policy ‘fixes’ things” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 31), but despite gaining traction in the mainstream agenda and successive policy statements re-iterating the need for Asia literacy in Australian schools, the solution has still has not ‘fixed’ the problem and consistent and meaningful application of an Asia literate curriculum remains limited (AEF, 2010; Wilkinson & Milgate, 2009).

At the outset, I wish to stress that particular curricula manifestations of Asia literacy, be they cultural and/or language studies, embedded or discrete, are not the primary focus of this article. Rather, I interrogate the constructedness of strategic arguments articulating a need for Asia literacy in key cultural policies disseminated by the AEF. This analysis is presented irrespective of potential curricula forms of Asia literacy; however I acknowledge the scholarly imperative for work focussing on challenges particular to various forms of implementation.

This paper explores the values and objectives at play in the ‘problem’ that requires Asia literacy. Tensions and implications arise out of representations of the necessary ‘solution’ in policy, contributing to a seeming *stasis* for Asia literacy in Australian education. Firstly, the benefit of drawing on both Bacchi’s *What’s the problem?* as a critical conceptual tool to interrogate the problem, and Bhabha’s notion of mimicry to extend discussion around how notions of the problem can be disrupted, is established. Secondly, the analysis addresses the terrain of Asia literate policy at the macro level in two parts. Part One critically engages with the initial problematisation of Asia literacy in policy production in the mid-1990s at the nexus of Asia literacy and the mainstream agenda. This contextualises contemporary policy explored in Part Two, which for its part extends this initial engagement to consider emerging events in the field and contemporary AEF policy text. Then, meta-analysis of problematisations identified in Part One and Two are compared to identify in/consistencies in policy narratives and key arguments surrounding policy. Finally, I draw conclusions from this analysis and identify alternate possibilities for representations of knowing Asia in education.

Approach

Analysis in this paper focuses on policy as text. Of interest here is how the problem of economics and Orientalism is constructed and orientated over time in key cultural policies. Following de Certeau, cultural policy is regarded “as a strategy made possible by the will and power of a properly constituted government agency and targeted at a client group whose representatives have been co-opted into the agenda of the corporate state”(cited in Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 305). Policy as text addresses policy at the macro level of the state.³ Despite the authority attributed to texts at this level and their endorsements from influential government bodies, it is important to note that they “are (a) not necessarily clear or closed or complete...[and that] (b) policies shift and change their meaning in the arenas of politics; representations change, key interpreters...change” (Ball, 1993, p. 11). Governing knowledge produced by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and AEF is constituted by certain discourses that determine how “purposes and intentions are re-worked and re-orientated over time” (Ball, 1993, p. 11).

Critically analysing representations of Asia literacy in policy genealogy explores shifts in meaning and interpretation. This requires that discourses are not totalising or immutable but “need to be recognised as multiple and contradictory”(Bacchi, 1999, p. 40). Policy can be considered as both ‘text’ and ‘discourse’ (Bacchi, 1999, 2009; Henry, 1993; Nudzor, 2009), shaping representations and possibilities for interpretations.

Carol Bacchi’s (1999, 2009) What’s the problem? critical policy approach provides a conceptual tool to interrogate both discursive presences and absences in policy. Bacchi’s approach engages with the complexity of policy formation, challenging “the commonplace view that policy is the government’s best attempt to deal with ‘problems’” (2009, p. 1). Her focus moves beyond accepting problems as innate, exploring instead their constructedness, or problematisation to “understand how policy decisions close off the space for normative debate because of the impression that indeed they are the best solution to a problem”(1999, p. 20). Bacchi’s (1999, 2009) approach includes three main aspects:

- Identification of the problem; including assumptions inherent to and origins of this representation,
- Problematising the problem; silences, effects and aspects left unproblematic by this representation, and
- Alternatives to the problem; can it be disrupted or re-imagined?

³ Represented here by COAG and the AEF. COAG works as a direct extension of the corporate state, including the Prime Minister, State Premiers, Territory Chief Ministers and President of the Australian Local Government Association. Established in 1992, its role is to “initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms that are of national significance and which require cooperative action by Australian governments (for example...education and training)” (COAG, 2011). The AEF, established in 1992, is a joint activity of Asialink at the University of Melbourne and the Curriculum Corporation, receiving core funding from the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training to “advocate[s] for and support[s] Asia literacy in Australian schools (AEF, 2011a). AEF position statements, developed to guide curriculum decisions in Australian schools, are an example of cultural policy due to the role the AEF has in producing governing knowledge about Asia literacy. In 2011, the AEF is considered a “key stakeholder” by the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) in the development and implementation of NALSSP (DEEWR, 2011) and is responsible for managing one of the four forms of this funding; Becoming Asia Literate: Grants to Schools.

This process allows exploration of options to re-open the space around problem representations in policy.

Postcolonial analysis has been advocated as a useful tool to re-open the space around critiques of cultural policy in Australia (Singh, 1995b; Singh & Miller, 1995). Mimicry offers an analytic tool “whereby the contradictions and marginalised elements present in governmental cultural policy can be juxtaposed in order to shed a different light on the policy itself” (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 305). Applied initially in reference to a system of subjectification used when annexing the British economy in India, mimicry operates through the suppressed element, “as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). This is applicable here as Australian economic interest in Asia similarly requires the formation of ‘Asia literate’ workers (Singh & Miller, 1995). There is

a split way in which reform is doubly understood, on the one hand a description and legitimation of certain changes in and through education, and on the other, as a signifier of a potentially intolerable or threatening challenge to existing asymmetrical power relations. (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 306)

This creates a crisis of cultural priority. Australia and Asia appear to have cultural affinity, yet Asia’s cultural difference as recognisable Other creates a seemingly un-reconcilable rift (Bhabha, 1984). Un-reconcilable binaries contribute to this crisis and can be identified to liberate otherwise suppressed elements. In this instance, Bhabha’s (1995, p. 86) view of mimicry as a form of mockery is privileged as

a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the [colonial] subject as a ‘partial’ presence’.

Reading policy text against itself interrogates problematisations, identifying marginalised concerns recognized as part of dominant discourse (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 307). Liberating these suppressed elements is a tactic for elucidating broader frames of reference and investigating alternatives to existing problematisations.

Mimicry, paired with Bacchi’s (2009) use of binaries, explores what presuppositions underlie the problem. Binaries simplify complex relationships that encompass hierarchy and privilege, “hence we need to watch where they appear in policies and how they function to shape the understanding of the issue”. Mimicry enhances critical analysis of binary function to “challenge the discourse’s authority through identifying slippages...[and] inconsistencies in the prevailing discourse” (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 307). This application is not a “deliberate undermining of policies we dislike” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 214), but rather a “tactic whereby the contradictions and marginalised elements...can be juxtaposed in order to shed a different light on the policy” (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 305).

Asia literate solution: What is the problem?

Over 40 government and non-government policies, documents, committees, working parties and organisations explored the need for Australians to learn Asian languages and about Asian cultures between 1969 and 1994 (Henderson, 2007). The coupling of the market potential of the Asian region with growing emphasis on national economy in policy saw growth in the seeming importance of the need to negotiate this phenomenon. The historical growth of Australian economic interest in Asia within

this period and its contribution to government policy in this field is noted by Henderson (2003) as developing in the following stages:

1. The need for parity of status of Asian languages with European,
2. The need to establish a culture of foreign language learning,
3. The need of the changing global and regional environment,
4. The need to boost the national economy,
5. The need to cement economic links, and
6. Commission and acceptance of economic interest.

The latter culminated in 1994 with a long term plan aimed at producing an Asia-literate generation to boost Australia's international and regional economic performance (Henderson, 2003). Kevin Rudd, then Opposition Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs, was Chair of the COAG report *Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future* (Rudd, 1994), herein after referred to as the Rudd Report. This Report, considered a turning point in cementing Asia literacy as problem/solution in mainstream agenda, sits within an economic rationale to develop an Australian "export culture which is 'Asia-literate'" (Rudd, 1994, p. 2). Henderson considers this rationale a pragmatic choice: "Rudd knew that the Report would only achieve political endorsement if it was presented in terms which addressed the economic well-being of the nation, as stipulated by COAG's Terms of Reference" concluding that "any deviation from such economism⁴ would undermine its political acceptance" (1999, p. 203).

The report is positively regarded for securing a place for Asia literacy in education, and the work of the AEF has been crucial in supporting this aspect (Henderson, 1999, 2003, 2007; Singh, 1996b; Slaughter, 2009). *National Asian Language/Studies Strategy for Australian Schools* (NALSAS), developed in response to the report, was a Commonwealth Government initiative targeting Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian, Korean languages and Studies of Asia. This program ran from 1995 to 2002. Practically, it "provided a much-needed financial and image-related boost for Asian languages study" (Slaughter, 2009, p. 5). Optimistically, successes of NALSAS,⁵ despite its early demise, suggest that education systems were undergoing a cultural transformation and recognised the educational and strategic benefits of a long term commitment to Asian languages and studies in school curriculum (Henderson, 2007). The AEF was instrumental in supporting this transformation. It was targeted as a key agency with which to form partnerships for marketing and delivery of curriculum and developing and maintaining a strategic working relationship (Curriculum Corporation, Unknown). To support this strategy the AEF released *Studies of Asia: a statement for Australian schools* (1995). This statement targeted schools, asserting that "in all learning areas the studies of Asia deserve a status comparable with studies of other nations and cultures" (AEF, 1995, p. 1). Furthermore, it was positioned as an extension of government policy and an expansion of the Rudd Report .

⁴ Henderson's (1999, p. 3) use of economism aligns with a broad use "that economic factors pre-empt other concerns for policy making in the modern state".

⁵ Successes include inclusion of three of the priority languages as part of the 12 Asian languages taught in all States and Territories, growth of more than 50% in numbers of school students studying an Asian language in both state and Catholic sectors (in contrast, Slaughter, [2009] cites a decline in the Catholic education system in Victoria and NSW, at least in comparison to other systems), and participation of over 1000 schools in the Access Asia program (Henderson, 2007).

How does policy create the problem?

The Rudd Report and 1995 AEF statement played a key role in establishing the Asia literacy solution on the mainstream education agenda. This agenda highlights a connection between Asia literacy and the economy; a connection which is both key to securing this position and problematic. The tension that the narrow economic policy frame creates for intellectual and cultural foundations is noted elsewhere (Healy, 2009; Singh, 1995b, 1996b) and not only for Australia (Pang, 2005). Henderson (1999) notes that Rudd could have taken up a broader policy frame, positioning Asia literacy within both economic and intellectual and cultural foundations.

Michael Garbutcheon Singh is the primary commentator in the initial problematisation of Asia literacy, offering substantive critique on the narrow economic frame. His work has been particularly influential in highlighting the dangers of a neoliberal agenda (1996b) and warrants close examination to establish initial problematisation of, and tensions within such problematisation, of Asia literacy. As noted above, commentators were quick to problematise the neoliberal agenda of the Rudd Report. Within this agenda, Singh asserts:

there is no neutral position from which Australians can study Asian languages and cultures; this curriculum initiative is already saturated with Australia's economic interests and concerns about creating new employment opportunities. (1996b, p. 159).

This problematisation highlights a dominant view of globalisation which assumes that the global economy is reified and unavoidable. Popular discourses on globalisation are highly ideological, privileging economic over political and cultural process. This includes an emphasis on instrumental values of competition and economic choice (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) at the exclusion of alternative discourses and practices (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). Assumptions around the globalised context of the problematisation are consistent with “globalisation from above” that “disseminates a consumerist ethos” (Falk, 1993, p. 39) and often read as “simply neo-liberal economics” (Lingard, 2006, p. 290). Within this paradigm, the Rudd Report positions Asia literacy as key to “Australia's well-being...as a matter of economic interest to governments, businesses, unions and Australia's youth” (Singh, 1996b, p. 159).

Singh (1996b) also problematises Asia literacy in the Rudd Report as a form of neo-colonialism that signals alterations to capitalist modes in Asian societies. Australia's dependence on Asian markets is articulated through “competency in cultural understandings ...presented as an important factor in achieving international cost-competitiveness” and the need to “resuscitate the study of languages other than English, especially those of Asian trading partners” . Robertson (2005) suggests that “what unites...policies is the invoking of “the knowledge economy” as if the knowledge economy was not only an unproblematic idea but an unproblematic reality”. Central to this invocation is human capital theory. Asia literacy is called upon to demystify the Asian market and is clearly linked to employment growth in the Rudd Report.

This need to demystify is intertwined with notions of Orientalism: a construction used by the West to define itself as superior in contrast to the inferior, strange and exotic Orient (Said, 2003). In the context of Asia literacy, Asia enters hegemonic discourse by possessing an economic advantage for which Australia has to compete. The Asia

literate solution is a process of Othering that includes rather than excludes. It assumes that appropriate knowledge needed to boost business can be discretely identified, inserted and accurately re-presented into curriculum (Williamson-Fien, 1996), facilitated by policy such as AEF position statements.

The subtext of this inclusion is that Asia literate knowledge is all that is needed to invert reliance on Asia and assert Australia's dominance in economy. This resonates with neo-colonialism, opening the door for positioning Asia as the Oriental Other (Singh, 1996b): a fecund economy that is now sophisticated, and requires a more strategic approach to penetrate and pillage (Singh, 1995a). It also positions Australia as homogenous, failing to acknowledge the historical realities of Australia already engaging with Asia, or the realities of Asian-Australians (Broinowski, 1992; Salter, 2009; Singh, 1995b; Singh & Miller, 1995).

Problematisation: Part One

As an extension of government policy and expansion of the Rudd Report, the first dedicated policy text, *Studies of Asia: A statement for Australian schools* (AEF, 1995) illustrates the nucleus of policy at the nexus of Asia literate and mainstream agendas. Primarily, it threatens to sanitise Otherness, making it difficult to create critical space for other possibilities (Williamson-Fien, 1996) to re-orient curriculum. Post-colonial analyses are advocated as a tool to disrupt Orientalism (Singh, 1995a, 1995b, 1996b; Singh & Miller, 1995). Singh and Miller's analysis of this statement employs mimicry in a search for disruption as "mimicry aims to repeat rather than re-present, in a way that undermines dominant discourses by mocking their power" (1995, p. 307). The policy claims to resemble the dominant discourse of reform; "Australia's growing economic, social and political relationships with Asia have added urgency to calls for the development of educational policies which provide improved knowledge of...Asia" (AEF, 1995, p. 2). It differs from dominant discourse, however, by including marginalised elements that intimate that reform to allow Asia space in the curriculum would threaten Australia's existing identity and power position (Singh & Miller, 1995). Mimicry occurs in the way Asia is presented as being like Australia (assuming humanist values are universal) but not quite, resonating with Orientalism

at the very moment the policy acknowledges "difference". The statement, 'emotional and physical needs of human beings are the same' (p. 4) dislodges the power structures built into the cultural discourse on Asia, as well as Australia, effectively excluding a response, unless it is within the bounds of these values... discourse such as this gains its credence from being 'seen' as attempting to create open learning, a new opening in Australian cultural literacy, but its ambivalence regarding change and stability casts doubt on this as a serious possibility. (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 310)

Ambivalence is also evident in binaries of same/different and reform/stability. Cultural change and reform appear to be the dominant discourse, yet slippages reveal counter pressures that insist on stability through acknowledgement of what can be realised politically and economically (Singh & Miller, 1995).

Mimicry "shows up contradictions in cultural policy and creates possibilities, however slight, for taking advantage of displaced elements" (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 312). The binary of economic versus more philanthropic goals in Singh's own

analysis works to explore how the economic rationale can be disrupted by liberating marginalised elements which “may be developed according to more admirable goals” (Singh, 1995b, p. 17). The learning emphases of the statement, for example, broaden scope for engagement beyond an economic rationale (see Table. 1). Liberation work for “more admirable goals”(Singh, 1995b, p. 17) is invoked because positioning schools within an economic struggle delimits Asia’s contribution to Australia’s social and cultural life (Singh, 1995b, 1996a). Singh seeks to “reject the idea of a monolithic Asia, for instance, by exploring the complex issues of nationalism, class struggle, work and the individualising experiences of love and anger”(1995a, p. 612), advocating an agenda of “emancipatory human interests” (Singh, 1995a, p. 617) and “voices of less powerful Asian groups” (Singh & Miller, 1995, p. 311).

Tensions within this liberation work are evident. Firstly, Singh himself notes that rejecting a monolithic to “specialise in single issues such as civil rights, social justice...reflects unwarranted divisions.... How these might cohere as a mutual venture is not at present apparent”(1996b, p. 166). To move beyond potentially isolated representations of Asia is desirable, yet the alternative is not clear. Secondly, tentative explorations to attempt this (Singh, 1995b; Singh & Miller, 1995) include tensions regarding the use of western modernist frameworks (Williamson-Fien, 1996). Advocating representations of Asia informed by critical awareness, acknowledging risks of reformulating Orientalist discourse and privileging forms of Asian knowledge potentially reflects unwarranted divisions of a different nature. It embodies the quest for inclusiveness; Othering to include rather than exclude. There are attendant dangers of “trafficking in otherness” in this means of appropriation (Kong, 1995; Williamson-Fien, 1996). When exploring concepts such as social justice, Asian peoples remain the Other against which the efficacy, or otherwise, of particular cultural and historical constructs are judged (Williamson-Fien, 1996). Kong (1995) notes that this process protects the identity of Australia by inserting the Other into the circuit of hegemony, which maintains a space of difference – shifting the emphasis, rather than displacing the position of Other.

Essentially, a call is made to incorporate a “multi-vocal account of places and peoples” (Singh, 1995b, p. 7). Yet the premise of the Asia literacy project means the only “narrative possibility is to use the master discourse or nothing” (Kong, 1995, p. 93). Asia, despite critical engagement with its inherent complexity, will always be subject to risks of being “flattened and depoliticised” (Kong, 1995, p. 95) in representations. It is difficult to resist the temptation to normalise cultural contexts by making sense of them within colonial narratives (Prakesh cited in Williamson-Fien, 1996, p. 39). The problem in trying to open the narrative space is not so much of explanation, but to “live out the experiential and the theoretical...to articulate a geography of the possible” (Kong, 1995, p. 94).

Finally, despite his critique of economism, Singh (1996b) advocates that resistance may not be the best alternative. . It “may be more useful to engage in productive negotiations” to learn from and potentially shift interests, rather than out rightly disregarding problematic policy constructions, as

various forms of economic rationalisms create openings for pedagogical interventions that are not wholly predetermined; and that a provisional coalition may be formed with sectors of the

government and others for the express purpose of shifting the agenda.

His problematisation concludes with the suggestion that possible points of disruption or crisis could be used to negotiate productively with Asia literacy as an economic project (Singh, 1996b).

Singh is positively regarded for this initial problematisation and his suggestion that the Asia literate solution reconstitutes policy problems such as economism and Orientalism in new ways. There are tensions in this problematisation but the process is in itself complex: if the intent is to contest assumed problems and question the truth status of theoretical premises which shape policy (Bacchi, 2009), this contestation will necessarily be complicated. Above all, the importance of Singh's work lies in its value in contextualising problematisations and raising awareness of assumptions, prompting important questions to be asked of successive policy documents: Has the dominant agenda shifted over time? Have assumptions inherent in the initial problematisation been challenged? And if not, have points for disruption been taken up?

Part Two

Focussing on successive policy documents takes up Singh's challenge that concerns previously noted are "intended to provide a basis for the sustained critical reflection needed to interrupt the familiar and habituated appropriation, containment and domestication of curriculum changes" (1995b, p. 39). Subsequent policy documents,⁶ *National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools* (AEF, 2006b) and *National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools 2011-2012* (AEF, 2011b), can be problematised to identify repetition and interruption of his initial concerns, identifying both legacies of, and to some extent liberation from, dominant frames of initial policy.

The 2006 statement, endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 2005, "signalled...commitment to and the importance of educating Australians for a world in which the Asian region plays a major role" (AEF, 2006a, p. 3). It not only repeats Singh's concerns of economism and Orientalism but signals a significant increase in the former with the development of a divisive emphasis of competition with undertones of a security threat.

The economic problem is continued. Neoliberal globalisation is reiterated in the first sentence of the statement positioning Australia in a "global society and... global economy". Asia literacy is constructed as Australia's solution to this position and key advantage in competition for Asia's trade and investment:

The diversity of the Asian region, combined with rapid change and the impact of globalisation, makes our engagement an increasingly challenging task – much more so than we recognised a decade ago.

This demands timely, clever and flexible responses from Australia .

Asian languages are also seen as a key aspect in human capital needed to secure this advantage as "General Peter Cosgrove makes the point that, 'language skills and

⁶ For the scope of this study only the first edition of the 1995 statement has been used, with the 2006 statement considered the next significant shift.

cultural sensitivity will be the new currency of this world order”’. This shift in emphasis is also reinforced by changes to learning emphases in AEF statements – *Being informed about contemporary issues* and *Understanding contributions made by the peoples of Asia to the world* from the 1995 statement have been amalgamated into *Know about contemporary and traditional Asia* and a new emphasis – *Communicate* includes both intercultural communication and Asian languages (AEF, 2006b, p. 9) in the 2006 statement (see Table. 1). Languages, while noted as a factor to be considered when determining priorities, are not explicit in the 1995 emphases. As with the 1995 statement though, the 2006 emphases’ suggested for the curriculum have the potential to widen the economic scope (see Table. 1).

This statement also brings a divisive tension that departs from singly economic concerns, yet retains notions of Orientalist Asia as “a symbol of fecundity” (Singh, 1995a, p. 609). A security discourse is evident in a growing emphasis on geography as “[Asia’s] diverse region’s [sic] rapid development demands increasingly sophisticated and informed responses from Australians”. In contrast to the exclusively intellectual experts used to support the 1995 statement, in 2006 a military expert is included. General Peter Cosgrove, leader of the international peacekeeping mission to East Timor in 1999, is cited with a call to be a “good neighbour” (AEF, 2006b, p. 4). While this appears to appeal to “more admirable goals” (Singh, 1995b, p. 17), tension in this humanitarian call is revealed as deeper understanding necessary to be a good neighbour “will make it much easier for us to handle those occasions in the future when political, strategic or economic tensions arise between Australia and the countries of our region”, a region which is represented “as diverse as our bilateral and multilateral strategic security and economic alliances” . There are, however, some attempts to disrupt discourses around these alliances. Calls for cohesiveness and harmony through “good neighbours”, “responsible global citizens” and “harmonious Australia” contrast with suggestions that Australia needs a cultural advantage during times of tension that “is highlighted by international events of recent years”.

Finally, the tactic of mimicry highlights resonating Orientalist discourse. Attempts to recognise a more heterogeneous Australia include slippages. Asian peoples “represent the cultural heritage of a growing number of Australians” (AEF, 2006b, p. 2) and “our schools include teachers, students and parents from Asian backgrounds”(AEF, 2006b, p. 5) however two of the six interlinked elements that support implementations of the statement cast doubt on this heterogeneous identity. The fourth element (*Engaging parents and the community*) and the fifth (*Teacher education*) do not acknowledge this heritage. It is marginalised by discourse that emphasises the need to inform parents and the community of the importance of the initiative, implying that they are Eurocentric and need “arguments and evidence” to convince them. Teacher education similarly needs to “increase opportunities for trainee teachers to learn about and engage with Asian cultures and languages” , assuming that they may not already be part of such cultures. This also excludes the possibility that teachers of Asian Studies could be sourced directly from Asia. Further slippages can be seen in the reform/stability binary. This statement “builds on” the previous one and “reflects” work already undertaken and “studies of Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia are being included” in courses. This contrasts with acknowledgement that curriculum design “is a major challenge” in which “there will be considerable disparity” that “requires a cultural change”.

Slippages in the call for cultural change to re-orientate the curriculum generate ambivalence in policy, rather than decisiveness. It is this very dilemma that has contributed to the stagnation of dialogue around Asia literacy: calling for reform yet meeting resistance in policy. The consequent slippages indicate that the “familiar and habituated appropriation, containment and domestication” (Singh, 1995b, p. 39) of Asia literate policy has been interrupted in only a very limited way. Without due attention, issues in Singh’s initial problematisation continue to be replicated rather than resolved and policy calls for Asia literacy become louder, but more frustrated by their own ambivalence and that of the policies being enacted.

The 2011 statement is an example of this pairing of ambivalence and frustration. It begins with an imperative: “the *Melbourne Declaration* acknowledges the clear demand for Australian schools to become Asia literate”, pointing to skills that “all Australian students should” have. The severity of reform needed is acknowledged because “the growing influence of India, China and other Asian nations both globally and in Australia, is a major change”. In the third paragraph, the timeliness of this imperative is emphasised because “Australia’s engagement with Asia... has grown at a faster rate than our engagement with the rest of the world combined”. The uncertainty of the imperative is then revealed and by the fourth paragraph is metered more as desire, since Asia literacy – it appears – is still seeking acceptance as the “aim of the statement is to advocate for and acknowledge the place of Asia literacy”.

Economic concerns in this statement perpetuate perceptions of Asia as a fecund economy (Singh, 1995a). It implies that there are economic problems that Australia will face if it does not find a way to negotiate the inherently different ways of Asia, specifically in regards to trade, investment and neoliberal globalisation. This implication is made through both presences and absences. The statement is prefaced with an extract from the *Melbourne Declaration*: “Global integration and international mobility have increased rapidly in the past decade”(cited in AEF, 2011b, p. 1). As such it emphasises the urgency and inevitability of globalisation. “Trade” and “investment” are cited first as reasons why Australia’s engagement with Asia is necessary. Finally, it is the absence of trade interests other than Asia that reinforce representations of difference.

The extract taken from the *Melbourne Declaration* to support the statement cites “the growing influence of India, China and other Asian nations”(MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). It is interesting to note that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (2011) cites India as Australia’s third top export market, and makes special note that India is one of Australia’s fastest growing major trading partners. Similarly, China is the top two-way trading partner, top export market and import partner (2011). Other Asian nations that figure highly in these figures are Japan (second top two-way trading partner and third biggest foreign investor) and the Republic of Korea (fourth top export market and two-way trading partner)(2011). This pattern appears to confirm that a strategy to increase the Asia literacy of today’s students and tomorrow’s business leaders is the solution necessary for “a competitive edge” and “national advantage”(AEF, 2011b, p. 2) in economic negotiations.

Asia is further re-Orientalised in the learning goals: “Asia and its diversity”; “Achievements and contributions of the peoples of Asia”; and “Asia-Australia engagement”(AEF, 2011b, p. 2). The statement assumes that these learning goals

summarise appropriate knowledge that can be neatly identified and inserted into curriculum – knowledge needed to boost business. These goals are positioned as being essential for Australia to be clever and “competitive” (AEF, 2011b, p. 2) in interactions with Asia. It is, however, also absences in policy that contribute to tensions around Orientalism, notably the absence of calls for an “America-literate” program to help facilitate trade with the United States, which is Australia’s third top two-way trading partner, fifth top export market, second top import source and top foreign investor in Australia (DFAT, 2011).

There is also further evidence of ambivalence. Despite demands for cultural change noted above, the purpose of the statement is drawn back to stability by suggesting Asia literacy is already included in curriculum, identified by the *Melbourne Declaration* as a “key part of the Australian curriculum” that can be achieved “in the context of existing policies and practices”(AEF, 2011b, p. 2). As a cross-curriculum priority, however, its effectiveness is questioned within the statement: it seems that Asia literacy should be “embedded in all learning areas” but it “will have a strong but varying presence depending on the their relevance to each of the learning areas” . The message conveyed regarding the ability of the Australian curriculum to be the answer to the call for reform is confused. Asia literacy is positioned as both dominant and marginalised at the same time; already accepted yet still requiring advocacy.

In contrast, the 2011 statement also attempts to disrupt the competitive economic scope by developing a parallel vision that privileges harmony more than competition. The imagined community of Australia is constructed through “our young people” who will “build a creative, prosperous and socially cohesive Australia” and be inductive to developing “harmonious regional and global communities”(AEF, 2011b, p. 2). It emphasises the interdependence of global communities: “the growing influence of [Asian nations] globally”, “global mindset”, “global communities” and “global citizens”. Australians are urged to think globally and consider themselves as part of a wider, and inevitably global, landscape. Here social imaginary is used to secure consent and legitimise policy authority (Rizvi, 2006, p. 198). Repeated use of ‘global’ also reinforces associations with perceptions of globalisation as being inescapable, and it reinforces a neo-liberal rationale.

Finally, this rationale is perpetuated in policy assemblage. As noted above, the national statement aligns itself with the *Melbourne Declaration* which notes a special need to engage with cultures, “especially the cultures and countries of Asia”(MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9), of which India and China (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4), are foregrounded. Similarly, *National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program* (NALSSP), to which the Australian Government has committed funding of A\$62.4 million from 2009-2012 reinforces the point that the program will equip the students today with the skills to excel in the careers of tomorrow in our increasingly globalised economy...help build a more productive and competitive nation. This is beneficial for our economy, community and individuals, creating more jobs and higher wages and overall better opportunities for all Australians. (DEEWR, 2011)

Additionally, of the four languages targeted by the NALSSP, three – Chinese, Japanese and Korean – align with Australia’s major trading interests. The fourth, Indonesian, is Australia’s tenth top export market (DFAT, 2011) and closest neighbour, which aligns with security interests that were noted in the 2006 statement.

<i>Studies of Asia: A statement for Australian schools (1995)</i>	<i>National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools (2006)</i>	<i>National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools (2011b)</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing concepts of Asia 2. Challenging stereotypes 3. Being informed about contemporary issues 4. Understanding contributions made by the peoples of Asia to the world 5. Considering the likely implications of closer Asia-Australia relationships 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand ‘Asia’ 2. Develop informed attitudes and values 3. Know about contemporary and traditional Asia 4. Connect Australia and Asia 5. Communicate 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Asia and its diversity 2. Achievements and contributions of the peoples of Asia 3. Asia-Australia engagement

Table 1. Learning emphases for Asia literacy across AEF national statements.

Re-imagining the solution

Since 1994 policy assemblage has struggled to progress significantly beyond initial successes of securing a position on the mainstream education agenda and raising the profile of Asia literacy. In spite of ebbs and flows in government funding, Asia literacy, due in no small part to the AEF, has maintained a profile in policy agenda. As Singh (1995a, p. 600) notes, however: “While the slogan ‘Asia literacy’ has proved useful for mobilizing government action, its curriculum manifestations remain unclear”. In terms of classroom presence, there are still notable absences regarding significant and sustainable application of Asia literate curriculum (AEF, 2010; Wilkinson & Milgate, 2009). The National Curriculum, seeking to re-assert Asia literacy within the mainstream agenda with its inclusion as a cross-curricular priority, creates an opportune space to create clearer curriculum manifestations. Although clearly committed to the promotion of Asia literacy, ambivalence in policy may mean that the substantial body of work the AEF has generated has not reached as far as it could in advocating how this space may be realised.

To date, policy representations of Asia literacy derived from Australia’s economic interests are proving difficult to challenge. The solution of Asia literacy presented in policy privileges knowledge – primarily economic and human capital knowledge. Educational policy objectives closely tied to economic goals are “derivative of neoliberal economic thinking” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 196). These links have been made in a variety of traditionally western educational contexts that have realised that an education-based strategy may be essential to economic engagement with Asia, such as: ‘Asia Pacific Studies’ in Canada, ‘Curriculum rapprochement’ in the

European Union, 'International education' in the United States of America and 'Educating for Asia' in New Zealand (Pang, 2005).

A similar link has also been made within Asia. Singh notes, "it is important to understand that studies of Asia are part of the larger processes of global restructuring" (1995b, p. 39). While western contexts seek to make others' cultures attractive through policy, China has focussed on making "its culture attractive to others" (Ding & Saunders, 2006, p. 22) to help resolve economic, cultural and diplomatic goals (Ding & Saunders, 2006). The Chinese government has tethered these goals "to the global popularity of Chinese. The latest tool in this arsenal is the Confucius Institute" (Ding & Saunders, 2006, p. 19)⁷. "Political foreign policy and economic interest" frame these goals, with "the underlying implication that economic strength and partnerships is the deciding factor" (Zhao & Huang, 2010, p. 132) in placing Confucius Institutes (CIs) in international sites.

There are suggestions that CIs use soft power to position Australia as a fecund entity and site where China's goals can be asserted. In Australia CIs have been approached with caution due to concerns of hidden agendas and that the integrity of Chinese studies run by the government of China may negatively impact on Australia's agency to negotiate and critique China's economic and political values on its own terms (Yang, 2010). Soft power "emanate[s] from the attractiveness of one's ideas or one's ability to set the political agenda in such a way that manipulates others actors' preferences so that they mirror one's own" (Ding & Saunders, 2006, p. 9). CIs serve to expand China's international influence. As the Asia literate solution highlights, Australia is a peripheral economy and sees great advantage to securing relationships with Asian neighbours. Opportunities for trade and investment with and within China mean that "few countries would not be lured to such an economic temptation, therefore, China has a strong soft power" (Li & Worm, 2010, p. 73). Furthermore, soft power is considered an essential strength for the 21st century (2006, p. 11).

CIs utilise cultural soft power premised on China's unique cultural and attractive cultural resources (Li & Worm, 2010, p. 75), particularly Chinese language. However two notes must be made here. Firstly, English as a foreign language (EFL) is still recognised as "the ideal commodity in the knowledge economy during the process of industrialization in China and Asia" (Zhao & Huang, 2010, p. 131). The promotion of Chinese language is not seen as a replacement for engaging with English as the *lingua franca* for trade but the work of establishing EFL in China has greatly informed policy of Chinese as a foreign language [CFL] in China (Zhao & Huang, 2010)⁸. Secondly, the work of CIs in developing soft power is still being explored. Despite the proliferation of 339 CIs spread over 83 countries since the first CI in 2004, and predictions of over 1000 by 2020 (Zhao & Huang, 2010, p. 129), Li and Worm (2010) suggest that China's cultural soft power is in fact underdeveloped, and that CIs can be a coordinating agency for the international advancement of China's cultural strategy and the application of its cultural resources.

⁷ CIs are managed directly through headquarters in China, a direct subsidiary to the Beijing based Office of the Chinese Language Council International, known as *Hanban*. *Hanban* was established in 1987, "establishing non-profit public institutions which aim to promote Chinese language and culture in foreign countries" (Hanban, Unknown-a).

⁸ CFL programs run in China parallel to English as a foreign language programs that run in English-speaking countries.

Regardless of strategies employed to further economic interests, the neoliberal focus of the Asia literacy discourse has not provided a panacea for Australia's economic deficiencies. In fact in most countries in the world economic growth has slowed and economic inequality worsened (Hursh & Henderson, 2011) despite this focus. Rizvi (2007, p. 259) challenges this neo-liberal emphasis, suggesting that contemporary ideological constructions of globalization need to be explored otherwise neoliberal ideas will "continue to appear as a natural and inevitable response to the steering logic of economic globalization" (p. 259). The imperative that knowledge needs to be useful reflects a utilitarian emphasis, which is also embedded in the logic that privileges Science knowledge in education. Solesbury notes that "government demands science policy that views academic research as a means of economic and social development much more than as a cultural end in itself"(cited in Bacchi, 2009, p. 241) and as such produces a narrow understanding of relevance. If consistently represented within an economic rationale Asia literacy too is at risk of a narrow frame of reference rather than a cultural end in itself.

Neoliberal focus denies "the primacy of human relationships in the production of value, in effect erasing the social" (Ball, 2008, p. 22). The suggestion that Asia literacy is the solution for Australia's economic future, leaves unaddressed the good we live when not focussed on trade and the economy and neglects social contributions Asia literacy can have to Australia (Singh, 1996b). All AEF statements refer to globalisation and global communities and there is space here for globalised education for a social democratic approach that creates an alternative to neo-liberalism (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). For example CIs have found space to engage with notions of globalisation that go beyond neoliberal focus. The first general principle of CIs illustrates this provision, using Chinese language and culture education as a tool for "deepening friendly relationships with other nations, to [promote] the development of multi-culturalism, and to construct a harmonious world" (Hanban, Unknown-b). An analysis of all available home pages and links to CIs on the Internet suggests that CIs worldwide realise this vision and "make connections between countries, cultures, institutions, communities and individuals" (Zhao & Huang, 2010, p. 139). I am not so naïve to suggest that the motives for these connections are purely philanthropic, but they do indicate a willingness to engage with a broader social democratic approach. Asia literacy policy has also indicated a willingness to engage with a broader social democratic approach. The learning emphases included in AEF position statements include knowledge, skills and understandings that traverse an economic rationale. As noted above Singh has already identified potential points for disrupting a neoliberal rationale. Re-imagining economic globalisation could also become one of these "more admirable goals"(Singh, 1995b, p. 17).

Alternative Options

Here I offer three positions for consideration. Firstly, perhaps the key is not in resistance to economism, but in finding another way to see the economic agenda as a positive move forward. For example, China is utilising soft power as a way of moving forward within an economic agenda. In part, the economic agenda can be viewed as a subject position constructed by a neo-liberal emphasis on education in general, a problem bigger than Asia literacy with an "insistent singularity' that links the reform of educational practices to the global economy"(Ball, 2008, p. 15). In Australia, education *per se* – not just Asia literate education – is rationalised through human

capital theory as evidenced in the opening sentence of the *Melbourne Declaration*: “In the 21st century Australia’s capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation.” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). Is there a way to resolve ambivalence in policy texts to move forward within an economic agenda, or is this a position that cannot be entertained until the problem of neoliberal education is addressed? This problem is tied to re-imagining the ways in which globalisation is understood, which is integral to the second position.

A possible alternative could be found in a radical departure from Asia literacy as a distinct policy agenda. As a policy initiative, Asia literacy makes clear divisions between forms of knowledge – knowledge of Australia and of Asia, knowledge that is considered useful for business and knowledge considered admirable – the hidden or minority voices of Asia. As noted above, Orientalism is inherent in the Asia literacy initiative as an agenda created with the specific purpose of “othering” Asian knowledge as a means of rationalising its inclusion in Australian schools. By this logic, it will always need to actively negotiate the narrative possibility of the Other it has already defined for itself. Even Singh’s call for “multidimensional” (1995b, p. 7) representation, though serving to broaden the economic scope and the learning emphases, can still be caught in this hegemony and subject to western modernist frameworks (Williamson-Fien, 1996).

An alternative to achieving the aims of Asia literacy, if the aims truly are to achieve “broad knowledge, skills and understandings” (AEF, 2011b, p. 2), is to move away from a discrete Asia literacy agenda to look for alternate ways to achieve cultural understanding. Rizvi (2008, p. 29) puts forth a “cosmopolitan” re-imagining of globalisation, “a particular way of learning about our own social identities and cultural trajectories, but always in ways that underscore their interconnectivity with the rest of the world”. This way of learning is no longer contained within the borders of the nation-state, or potentially, borders of conceptual constructs like Asia. It is here that we might look to the general capability defined in the National Curriculum as intercultural understanding. It

develops through sustained interaction between people from different cultural groups and their efforts to understand and relate to one another. It focuses on personal and social knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills that students need in learning to live together in a multicultural and multilingual world. (ACARA, Unknown)

This curriculum manifestation could be employed to challenge Eurocentric emphasis on a broader scale rather than fixed on a particular geographic region. While this addresses how Asia literacy is framed in policy, it may not necessarily resolve classroom absences of Asia literate knowledge or Asian languages.

Finally, it may be that in looking beyond policy as text to exploring policy in context that an alternate resolution to the problem may be found. This requires looking to those working with policy, rather than within the policy itself. How are teachers actively interpreting, negotiating, challenging and disrupting policy as text? While there have been some shifts, dominant economic and Oriental narratives remain. At the espoused level it appears that policy has made little progress. Of all of these positions it is most useful to look towards enacted policy for this progress in the first instance, and identify how policy has been taken up in context as a space for further

research. The “gaps and spaces for action and response” (Ball, 1993, p. 11) of potential re-workings and re-orientations of the policy itself seen here as creating ambivalence within the policy, may well serve as inspiration for classroom teachers looking to interpret in policy what is relevant to them at the micro level. Policy makers have not taken up Singh’s concerns, but teachers may have. Teachers ability to “invest the time, energy and resources” needed to engage with Singh’s concerns dominate his list of “indicators of change”(1995b, pp. 38-39). After all, it is teachers who do the ultimate negotiation of policy in context.

Negotiating the space around Asia literacy

The central representation of Asia literacy in this problematisation is undoubtedly an economic rationale, intertwined with notions of Orientalism. Ultimately, the use of Bacchi’s What’s the problem? critical approach and Bhabha’s mimicry interrogates Asia literacy policy highlighting ambivalence in strategic arguments that articulate Asia literacy as a necessary ‘solution’ for Australian education.

Current policy is littered with complex binaries that shape how Asia literacy is understood and rationalised; it is at the same time dominant and marginalised in curriculum reform, economic and philanthropic, competitive and harmonious, and neo-liberal and cosmopolitan in its perceived purpose. Slippages generate ambivalence, rather than decisiveness in policy and have contributed to dialogue around Asia literacy stagnating; calling for reform yet meeting resistance in policy evidenced by these slippages. This indicates limited interruption of “familiar and habituated appropriation, containment and domestication” (Singh, 1995b, p. 39) of Asia literate policy. This positioning of Asia literacy has not resulted in a sustainable widespread presence of Asia literacy in schools (AEF, 2010; Wilkinson & Milgate, 2009). Without due attention, issues in Singh’s initial problematisation continue to replicate rather than be resolved. As a result, policy calls for Asia literacy become louder, frustrated in their ambivalence. Furthermore, if left to continue on this current trajectory, Asia literacy is at risk of being viewed more as a means of economic development than a cultural end in itself, leaving unproblematic neo-liberal economics and narrative possibilities for alternative arguments.

Despite inclusion in the National Curriculum, Asia literacy cannot be considered a straightforward addition. Tensions in representations and interpretations are evident and in the current geo-political context are often inevitable. At times, working within the economic agenda appears to be a positive move forward, similarly a radical departure from a distinct policy agenda holds some appeal. I suggest that the work of teachers is vital in resolving ambivalence and should be a focus of further research. Well-informed teachers may assist in a greater understanding of such issues at particular points in time and in particular contexts.

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