



Towards a multilateral analysis of ‘knowing Asia’: a policy trajectory approach

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Dissertation Abstract

Various economic, political, social and cultural shifts have led to increasing interest in Australia and other Western countries in ‘Asia’.¹ Consequently, more educators are required to ‘know Asia’. In Australia, this engagement is conceptualised as ‘Asia literacy’ and led by the Asian Education Foundation (AEF). However, it is argued that there is an absence of ‘Asia literacy’ in both schools and tertiary education and lagging momentum in taking it up.

This thesis examines the epistemological and ontological assumptions in ‘Asia literacy’ policy and in the enactment of the policy in one high school in Queensland, Australia. It explores ‘Asia literacy’ policy in Australia, focusing on the heteroglossic discursive constructions of ‘Asia’, ‘knowing Asia’ and the imperatives to ‘know Asia’ and their transformations across different sites. This thesis contends that these transformations have a capacity to open up conceptual and political spaces to react back on global understandings that inform the broad political agenda of ‘Asia literacy’ and reconceptualise the significance of a trajectory of understanding policy.

The analysis of ‘Asia literacy’ is informed by a number of theoretical elements. It draws on the policy process in terms of Ball’s (1993) trajectory theory, and the constitution of the objects of policy using Bacchi’s (2009) ‘what’s the problem’ approach. It theorises the discourses of epistemological and ontological assumptions about ‘Asia’ and ‘knowing Asia’ at each point of the trajectory using Bacchi’s (2009) approach, Bhabha’s (1995) notion of mimicry, Sen’s (1997) view of capabilities and Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia as a basis for unpacking the heteroglossic character of the discourse. It also uses Said’s (1993, 2003) notion of Orientalism, Bhabha’s (1995) conceptualisation of hybridity and Ashcroft’s (2001) reading of reconceptualisation to frame critical postcolonial perspectives and Nakata’s (2012; Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012) appeal for convergence and Chen’s (2010) call for critical syncretism to extend these perspectives. Therefore, the reconceptualisation of the discourse of ‘Asia literacy’ has drawn on work of all of the above.

The thesis reflects the research strategy of investigating the three phases of the trajectory of this policy in sequence, and publication at each point in this process as a form of intervention back into the ongoing academic discourse around continuing policy development. Furthermore, reconceptualisation (Ashcroft, 2001; Parkes, 2007, 2012) is used as a generative lens to reflect on the whole and deduce significance of the whole over and beyond the significance of the parts. Key findings that emerged in this investigation are:

- Competing constructs of 'Asia' in and between policy text and policy actors that create an ontological dilemma between constructs of 'Asia' as unitary and knowable, and as complex and diverse, and between economic and cultural imperatives;
- Tensions for teachers as their epistemological assumptions about 'knowing Asia' create conflict between 'what to know' and 'how to know it'; and
- The agency of school actors, including school leaders and teachers, in transforming, not just implementing policy.

The thesis thus contends principally that to 'know Asia' requires a disruption of the discourse of 'Asia' as a unitary construct with questions of what constitutes 'Asia', and how exploring these questions opens up space for schools to engage with 'Asia literacy'. It proposes a re-vision of 'Asia literacy' as 'knowing Asia'; the process of 'knowing' opens up space to seek and traverse multiple directions, and identify guides in varied authors and voices. In 'knowing' too, this re-vision does not locate a fixed beginning to 'know' or an end-point that is 'known'. It does not attempt to explain 'Asia literacy' policy, but instead explores policy as social phenomena using a case study approach to investigate localised complexity in conjunction with a broader critical analysis of relevant policy and curriculum documents. Findings of this exploration are cross-examined through a dialogic reconsideration across and between all contexts of the policy trajectory to offer an alternative conceptualisation of knowing Asia.

This study does two things: firstly it illuminates the human capital paradigm for 'knowing Asia' evident across the globe (Pang, 2005; Singh, 1996b). While undoubtedly part of a larger response to global economic shifts, this paradigm positions the 'Asia literacy' project in policy as a "neo-colonial project which aspires to understand the object of Australia's economic desires" (Singh, 1995b, p. 9). Secondly, it uses a theoretical framework to explore epistemologies that both adhere to and challenge this paradigm. The study therefore contributes to the field of intercultural education through theorising a reconceptualisation of epistemologies to engage with 'knowing Asia'. The call for navigation and dialogue further accentuates "the 'inter'" in intercultural education as not only "a place of encounter but of negotiation and discussion" (Fiedler, 2007, p. 55).

Given the renewed impetus for Australia to engage with 'Asia' in the 'Asian century', and the responsibility given to education to support this engagement, a study of this nature is a significant contribution. Before issues such as resourcing are taken up for current and future manifestations of 'Asia literacy', such as the cross-curriculum priority 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' in the emerging Australian Curriculum, teachers' theoretical work in engaging with 'knowing Asia' requires specific attention to develop their capacity for cultural reflection. This points to the importance of critical reflection on cultural mapping as part of teacher identity formation and requires the crucial step of engaging teachers in this essential conceptual work.

¹ Editor's Note: Since the 1990s studies of 'Asia' have waxed and waned as a priority in Australian History curricula.

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