

Teaching Asia: English Pedagogy and Asia Literacy within the Australian Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The study was prompted by the introduction of three cross-curriculum priorities within the new Australian Curriculum, and the growing emphasis for students to become 'Asia literate'. It aimed to examine the attitudes that New South Wales English teachers currently hold towards addressing the cross-curriculum priority 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' within 7–10 classrooms. Sociocultural theory and qualitative research were utilised as a means of exploring and accounting for the ways in which these attitudes have been shaped, and the implications this has on curriculum enactment. The study examines the influences that have shaped teacher attitudes towards addressing the cross-curriculum priority, the perceived evidence of political and economic motivations behind the inclusion of the priority, how English teachers define 'Asia' and the consistency of such definitions with those put forth by The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and whether English teachers feel prepared to address this cross-curriculum priority in a way that enriches student learning and literacy. The research findings reflect that although English teachers believe that there is value in addressing the cross-curriculum priority, many feel ill-equipped or under-resourced to address it in a way that promotes deep learning and understanding for students.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the changing landscape of Australia's curriculum development and implementation has demonstrated a strong emphasis on ensuring that Australian students have the knowledge, skills, and capabilities to participate within an increasingly globalised world. Consequently, there is a focus on students becoming 'Asia literate', which includes 'the capacity to reflect upon and explore cultural differences in the Asian region [and] the ability to understand Asian cultures and gain knowledge about Asian people and their histories' (Asia Literacy Teachers' Association of Australia, 2016, para. 2). The steadily growing migration levels of people from countries within the Asia region to Australia, coupled with a growing emphasis

on developing culturally inclusive and relevant pedagogy, is highly reflective of the push for Australian school students to become 'Asia literate' (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016; Burrige, Buchanan & Chodkiewicz, 2009; Harris, 2013).

In 2015, the *New South Wales K–10 English Syllabus* was fully implemented across the state. One unique aspect of this new syllabus was the inclusion of three cross-curriculum priorities, which were aimed to 'provide dimensions which will enrich the curriculum through development of considered and focused content that fits naturally within learning areas' (ACARA, 2016a, para 1). The inclusion of one of these priorities, 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia', reflects the deepening ties between Australia and countries

within the Asia region in the spheres of economics, politics, migration and trade. This is particularly highlighted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, which state that the inclusion of this priority ‘reflects Australia’s extensive engagement with Asia in social, cultural, political and economic spheres’ (ACARA, 2016b, para 4).

The inclusion of the cross-curriculum priorities highlight that a sociocultural approach to education has influenced the construction of the *Australian F–10 Curriculum*, in that the cross-curriculum priorities are reflective of the current social context of Australian students. However, it does beg the question as to what attitudes English teachers hold toward teaching texts that address this outcome, particularly when it comes to issues concerning accessibility, cultural understanding and content knowledge. Though this cross-curriculum priority may encourage English teachers to explore rich literary traditions, compelling text types, and diverse subject matter, there is a risk that such topics are explored in a way that is tokenistic, or otherwise culturally insensitive. Potential factors leading to this risk may include the broadly defined geographic region that is Asia, a lack of understanding of cultural relativism, or teachers’ lack of confidence in their abilities to effectively cover subject matter.

To examine these concepts, this study sought to identify the factors that have influenced the attitudes and, in turn, practices that high school English teachers have towards teaching ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’, in order to understand the implications this has on the enactment of the *New South Wales K–10 English Syllabus*.

Research questions

The study asked: What are New South Wales English teachers’ attitudes and practices toward addressing the cross-curriculum priority ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’? To examine this, the following research questions informed this study:

1. What specific factors have led to, or influenced, high school English teachers’ attitudes towards addressing this cross-curriculum priority?
2. How do English teachers define ‘Asia’, and what implications does this have when addressing the cross-curriculum priority?
3. To what extent do teachers identify the political and economic motivations behind the inclusion of the cross-curriculum priority?
4. Do English teachers feel prepared to address this cross-curriculum priority in a way that enriches student learning and literacy?

Theoretical approach

A sociocultural theory of human learning posits that it involves a process that is inextricably influenced by an individual’s participation within the social and cultural contexts of his or her community (Perry, 2012; Wang, Bruce & Hughes, 2011). Central to this theory, first articulated by Vygotsky (1960), was the notion that ‘all higher psychological functions are internalised relationships of the social kind, and constitute the social structure of personality’ (p. 198). In light of this, a key aspect of the sociocultural framework is the process of examining the social sources of an individual’s development, in order to understand the complex relationship between learning and development. To achieve this, sociocultural approaches ‘emphasise the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge’ (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192).

In the context of literacy, sociocultural perspectives focus on ‘culture, activity, identity, power, and the sociocultural contexts in which literacy occurs’ (Perry, 2012, p. 52). Within this approach lies the concept of literacy as social practice, which postulates that ‘an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings’ (Street, 1993, p. 430). Rather than conceptualising literacy as a set of skills, Street’s (1993) ideological model established it as a set of practices that are developed and established within specific contexts that are ‘inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society’ (p. 433). Examining cultural and power structures is particularly useful for understanding the ways in which class, race, gender and religion impact and influence students’ understanding of literacy. Additionally, the use of critical globalisation theory contextualised the growing emphasis on Asia literacy in Australian schools through the lens of globalisation as a phenomenon that underpins the economic, social, cultural, and political processes experienced internationally (Pieterse, 2015).

These perspectives highlight not only the influence of context on the learner, but also the nature and role that power structures play in these contexts. As this study focused on English teachers’ attitudes and practices towards teaching subject matter outlined within key Australian curriculum documents, this framework allowed for the examination of the nature of power structures between education policies, governing bodies and teachers, and how such structures influence and impact upon the perspectives such teachers hold. Furthermore, a sociocultural theoretical approach to this study enabled the exploration of key contextual factors, including issues that pertained to race,

gender, class and religion, which are significant when addressing 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'.

Literature review

The literature pertaining to curriculum development within New South Wales over the past 20 years reveals the highly contentious nature of the goal for young Australians to become 'Asia literate' (e.g. Hamston, 2012; Henderson, 2015; Pan, 2013; Salter, 2015). This literature review firstly examines research regarding the historical context of Australia's curriculum landscape, the nature of the *Australian F-10 Curriculum*, and its construction. It then focuses on the concept of students becoming 'Asia literate', and the way in which 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' attempts to address this. Finally, the review examines the body of work that problematises the nature of the discourse and representation of Asia and its people.

Curriculum, policy and implementation

Recent curriculum theory reflects that there are two key, and often conflicting, areas of focus within modern curricula. These include an emphasis on what students should learn, as opposed to what students should become (Brady & Kennedy, 2010; Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Yates & Grumet, 2011). Lingard and McGregor (2014) argued that the current *Australian F-10 Curriculum* comprises of a balance between these two foci, as it is modeled as a traditional, discipline-based curriculum, but also includes 'cross-curriculum priorities' and 'general capabilities', thereby demonstrating what students should both 'learn' and 'become' (p. 104).

A significant number of changes to the curriculum landscape of Australia's schooling system occurred since the publication of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008). As a result, a growing body of work concerned with the development and implementation of the new *Australian F-10 Curriculum* emerged, with a particular focus on the geo-political and economic factors that influenced its framework (Atweh & Singh, 2011; Ditchburn, 2012; Lingard & McGregor, 2014; Savage, 2015). In contrast, Moni's (2012) work, rather than situating the *National Curriculum* in terms of economic or political factors, argued that the new curriculum provides the opportunity to 'open up the curriculum and English teaching increasingly into exploring texts from different cultures' (p. 16).

Though this reflects positive sentiment toward the inclusion of 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' within the curriculum, the cross-curriculum priorities

have drawn criticism, most notably in the 2014 *Review of the Australian Curriculum* (Australian Government, 2014). Within the review, Dr Kevin Donnelly and Professor Kenneth Wiltshire highlighted that there is concern for 'the seemingly political determination of these three 'priorities' through the *Melbourne Declaration* and a fear that changes of political persuasion could lead to constant changes in the 'priorities'' (p. 3). This apparent concern, however, is not widely reflected within contemporary research in this field (Atweh & Singh, 2011; Halse, 2015; Takayama, 2016).

'Asia Literate' and the Australian Curriculum

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant emphasis within the areas of public policy, economics and education within Australia on developing stronger ties with countries located in the Asia region (Capling, 2008; McAllister & Ravenhill, 1998; McDougall & Edney, 2010). When examining the history of Australia's attempt to become 'Asia literate' Pang (2005) highlighted that a favourable political and economic climate between Australia and Asia was essential for supporting and encouraging Asia literacy in Australia.

Peacock, Lingard and Sellar (2015) contextualised the inclusion of the cross-curriculum priority 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' within the emergence of the 'Asian century', and utilised theorisations of space-time to argue that the inclusion of this priority is 'a policy imaginary that predicts certain futures under the new *Australian Curriculum*, such as social inclusion, social cohesion and national prosperity' (p. 337). Having framed the cross-curriculum priority as a 'futures orientation' construction, Peacock et al. (2015) highlighted the correlation between Australian students becoming 'Asia literate' and their ability to become global citizens capable of engaging within Australia's Asian partners across social, political and economic landscapes. In the context of the English classroom, this leads to questions of the ways in which Asia and its people are represented through texts as well as how this contributes to 'Asia literacy'.

Discourse and representation of Asia

Utilising texts to address 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' has shed light on long-standing issues pertaining to the discourse and representation of Asia and its cultures, practices, and customs (Henderson & Jetnikoff, 2013; Lau & Mendes, 2012; Nguyen, 2002). Of particular significance to these issues is the way in which 'Asia' itself is defined. Salter (2009) highlighted that definitions of 'Asia' have, historically, been highly contested and debated, particularly given the various

terms by which it can be defined: geographical, cultural, religious, historical, or linguistic.

Salter (2015) argued that ACARA's emphasis on paying particular attention to the sub-regions of North-East Asia, South-East Asia and South Asia 'opens up Asia beyond the strategic development boundaries imposed by the *White Paper*, or the languages identified by the Asia Education Foundation ... yet they still seek to delimit Asia in geographical terms' (p. 784). This indicated that ACARA's definition of Asia based on geographical terms is problematic, particularly when it comes to the issue of text choice for secondary English teachers. A more critical approach to defining Asia beyond geographical bounds would provide teachers with a means of educating their students in a way that enables them to have a nuanced understanding of the region.

Approaches and attitudes towards teaching 'Asia'

Whilst there is a growing body of literature focused on the inclusion of the cross-curriculum priorities within the *National Curriculum* (e.g. Da Rosa, 2014; Exley & Mills, 2012; McGaw, 2014; Paynter & Bruce, 2014; Nicholas, 2016), in addition to the issues regarding the discourse and representation of Asia and its people within Western contexts, there is a significant lack of scholarship that examines how these impact secondary English teachers within their classrooms. As a result, our study sought to provide a new perspective within this area by examining secondary English teachers' attitudes and practices towards addressing 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'. In doing so, we aimed to shed light on the way discourse and representation factors into the choice of texts utilised by English teachers to address this priority, and explored the implications this has in regards to the concept of 'Asia literacy' within secondary English classrooms.

Methodology

Context

Due to curriculum requirements, all Australian students across New South Wales should learn about 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' within English classes between Years 7 to 10. Consequently, the study considered curriculum development and implementation, and took into account multiple factors – such as the context of the school, teacher knowledge of Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and accessibility to texts – that shaped teachers' attitudes and practices towards addressing this particular cross-curriculum priority.

Table 1: Survey demographics

		Number of Participants
Region of New South Wales	Central Coast	7
	Nepean / Blue Mountains	15
	Northern Sydney	2
	Inner Western Sydney	6
	South Western Sydney	12
	Sydney	27
	Western Sydney	10
	Central West New South Wales	3
Age	20–24	13
	25–30	9
	31–35	27
	36–40	8
	41–45	12
	46–50	7
	51–55	5
	56–60	1
Years of full-time teaching experience	1–5	15
	6–10	8
	11–15	32
	16–20	8
	21–25	9
	26–30	7
	31–35	2
	More than 35 years	1

Participants

Participants in this study included 82 New South Wales English teachers with full-time teaching experience (see Table 1). They were recruited through distributing emails to representative government, independent, and Catholic schools, and through posting links to relevant Facebook groups, such as the English Teachers Association, and to Twitter through the #engchat and #ozengchat hashtags. This approach to recruitment encouraged teachers from differing geographic areas and schooling systems to take part in the study.

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were invited to express their interest in completing a one-hour semi-structured interview, further expanding on

Table 2: Interview participants

Name*	Location of school	Years of teaching experience	Type of school	Role	Teaching prior to the implementation of the K–10 English Curriculum
Elaine	Sydney	11–15	Non-Government: Private	English teacher Programming	Yes
Mei	Western Sydney	1–5	Non-Government: Catholic	English teacher	No
Mary	Sydney	1–5	Non-Government: Christian	English teacher	No
Pamela	Western Sydney	1–5	Non-Government: Comprehensive	English teacher	No
Olivia	Western Sydney	1–5	Government: Comprehensive	English teacher	No
Charlie	South Western Sydney	21–25	Non-Government: Catholic	English teacher	Yes
Dean	Sydney	6–10	Non-Government: Private	English teacher	Yes

* All names are pseudonyms

the contexts of the survey. As the cross-curriculum priorities are only included within the K–10 New South Wales Curriculum, teachers with classes ranging from Years 7, 8, 9 or 10 were the most relevant to the study, as thus chosen for the interviews.

Data collection

Three key data sources were collected in order to address the research questions concerning the attitudes and practices of English teachers towards addressing the cross-curriculum priority. These data sources included an online survey of 82 English teachers that focused on their attitudes toward the cross-curriculum priority, hour-long semi-structured interviews with seven focal participants (see Table 2), and policy documents including the *Melbourne Declaration, New South Wales K–10 Syllabus* and the *Australian F–10 Curriculum*.

Gerber, Abrams, Curwood and Magnifico (2017) argue that ‘scholars have critically considered how to judge the trustworthiness of qualitative research’ (p. 84). The trustworthiness of this study has been established through undertaking multiple verification procedures that ensure the study is both valid and reliable. Creswell and Miller (2000) identified the key verification procedures that qualitative researchers can engage with to ensure their studies are trustworthy. Given this, triangulation and clarifying researcher bias has been undertaken as a means of establishing the rigour of this study. Member checking was utilised

as a verification procedure, which involved allowing the participants to critically analyse the findings of the study and comment on them; this was chosen as it not only provided the opportunity gain new insights into the data collected, but also allowed for the clarification of ideas (Saldaña, 2009).

Data analysis

As the study utilised a sociocultural framework, thematic analysis was chosen as a data analysis method, as both forms of inquiry focus on the social and cultural contexts of individuals, and how this informs an individual’s interpretation and understanding of their experiences. Thematic analysis is an ‘open-ended qualitative technique that can be useful for flexibly sorting and grouping initial findings’ (Gerber et al., 2017, p. 115), which was used in this study to interpret the data collected within the survey and interviews. This process involved a line-by-line close reading of the interview transcripts, in which the data was then separated into specific, recurrent themes. As the interpretations of the data that the researcher makes are influenced by their cultural and social context, the nature of this process is inherently subjective. In light of this, two cycles of coding were undertaken in the study to enhance the integrity of the research findings.

The initial cycle of coding undertaken used in vivo coding, also known as ‘values coding’, which involved assigning codes to key words or short phrases to the

participants' own words in the interview transcripts. This method was chosen as it enabled the concepts drawn from the participants' interviews to remain as close to their own words and experiences as possible (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013). The second cycle of coding undertaken was patterned coding, which was chosen as this method enables the data analysed within the first cycle to be organised into more meaningful and concise categories (Saldaña, 2009). This process involved grouping the in vivo codes into categories based on reoccurring themes and concepts.

Findings

This study found that a majority of English teachers see the value in addressing 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' in their classes. The factors that have shaped such attitudes ranged from acknowledging the cultural diversity of the Australian population, a desire to explore differing perspectives, the accessibility of texts and the level of autonomy teachers have over the selection of texts. The findings indicated that English teachers lacked clarity as to how 'Asia' is defined within the context of the cross-curriculum priority, which led to them making their own interpretations as to which texts were suitable. Though participants acknowledged the importance of addressing the cross-curriculum priority, a majority expressed that they have experienced difficulties in selecting texts and exploring the cross-curriculum priority in ways that enrich student learning and literacy, including in relation to political and economic motivations.

Defining 'Asia': Difficulties and implications

Given its diverse cultures, religions, politics, economies and customs, there are a multitude of ways in which one can define 'Asia'. ACARA notes that, in regards to understanding what 'Asia' encompasses, the region can be defined not only geographically, but also 'in terms of cultural, religious, historical, and language boundaries or commonalities' (ACARA, 2016a, para 7). This is further expanded on, with ACARA noting that:

While [Asia] includes West and Central Asia, in Australian schools, studies of Asia will pay particular attention to the sub-regions of: North-East Asia, including China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan; South-East Asia including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam; South Asia including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. (2016, para 8)

It is important to highlight that this information is not located anywhere within the *New South Wales K-10 English Syllabus* document, but rather, on the

Australian F-10 Curriculum website. Though the website is not difficult to find, teachers appear to be more familiar with accessing information published in physical publications, such as syllabi and curriculum support documents.

The study reflects that English teachers in New South Wales do not have a shared understanding of what constitutes 'Asia'. This raises a significant issue, given that teachers feel unsure as to whether they are successfully addressing the cross-curriculum priority, and implementing the curriculum in a way that reflects the intentions of ACARA. The interview participants offered a variety of definitions, spanning across geographic, cultural, religious and economic boundaries, of how they define 'Asia'. This is consistent with the geographical, cultural, religious, historical or linguistic means through which Salter (2009) argues Asia can be defined.

The reasoning behind these definitions ranged from their personal contexts and experiences, to perceived levels of 'knowledge' of Asia. Every participant named at least two or three specific countries, with the two most commonly cited ones being China and Vietnam; other countries mentioned included Japan, North and South Korea, Thailand, Cambodia and India. Furthermore, each participant was specific as to which boundary influenced their definition, and what countries were included within this. For example, Pamela stated, 'Geographically, I would say the land mass up to India and Pakistan, but economically, I would say countries like China and Japan and ... Indonesia. The countries that are trading partners with Australia.' This highlighted that such definitions have an influence on the origins of the texts or units designed to address this cross-curriculum priority.

The research findings reflect that for a majority of participants, there is an uncertainty as to what parameters define 'Asia', which appears to stem from a lack of clear definition within the *New South Wales K-10 English Syllabus* document. Elaine, Mary, Pamela, Oliva and Dean expressed some uncertainty in their definitions, and doubted whether their answer would be deemed 'correct', stating things such as 'I'm not sure ...', 'this is difficult' and 'is that right?' This demonstrates that some English teachers do not have a clear idea of what 'Asia' encompasses within the context of the cross-curriculum priority, thereby highlighting that there is a gap between what is mandated in curriculum documentation, and teachers' understanding of the requirements.

Of the seven participants interviewed, Mary, Pamela and Dean mentioned the possibility of the Middle East being included within 'Asia' based on geographical

boundaries. Although none of these participants have utilised texts from this region to address the cross-curriculum priority, they nevertheless felt these texts would be suitable for doing so. Including this region as part of Asia is consistent with the United Nations geoscheme for Asia, which categorises Middle Eastern countries as part of Central Asia, Western Asia and Southern Asia (United Nations, 2013, para 16–20). This highlights that although ACARA has provided a definition of ‘Asia’ within the context of the cross-curriculum priority, it is inconsistent with others that have been outlined by governing bodies such as the United Nations. English teachers, who have not been aware of ACARA’s definition of Asia, have used definitions of Asia that are at odds with what has been outlined within curriculum documents. As it is unclear whether the cross-curriculum priority can only be successfully addressed if the texts chosen focus the countries outlined in ACARA’s definition of ‘Asia’, it is evident that more transparency is needed between what is outlined within policy documents, and what is enacted within classrooms.

Political and economic influences on including ‘Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia’ as a cross-curriculum priority

In an overview of ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ on the *Australian F–10 Curriculum* website, ACARA states that ‘the economic importance of successful Australian engagement with Asia is undeniable’, and furthermore, that ‘Australia is increasingly looking to Asia strategically, politically and culturally as well as economically’ (2016a, para 2–3). It is therefore clear that the motivations for the inclusion of this cross-curriculum priority are deeply rooted in the political and economic benefits gained from Australia creating closer ties with its neighbours in Asia. This reflects the current climate of education policy changes within Australia, which are pushing for school students to become ‘Asia literate’ to further the political, economic and social ties between Australia and its Asian partners (Peacock, Lingard & Sellar, 2015).

Of the seven participants interviewed, five noted that their school utilised Ahn Do’s *The Happiest Refugee* (2010) as a text that addresses the cross-curriculum priority. The reasoning behind this choice ranged from its genre as an autobiography, student familiarity with Ahn Do, the comedic undertones of the text, and its perceived clarity in highlighting Australia’s engagement with Asia through refugee experiences. Although the participants noted that they did not use it to address Australia’s political and economic ties with Asia, it is interesting to note that the subject matter of refugees

seeking asylum in Australia is highly politicised. As this autobiography is a particularly popular text choice, it can be argued that Australia’s ‘engagement’ with Asia is typically explored through the lens of Asian asylum seekers migrating to Australia. While this is reflective of a social justice approach to addressing curriculum requirements (Dolby, 2012; Welton, Harris, La Londe & Moyer, 2015), it can be problematic for students to simply frame Australia’s ‘engagement’ with Asia through refugee patterns, particularly if texts are utilised in a shallow or tokenistic way to address the cross-curriculum priority.

Of the 82 participants surveyed, 76% indicated that they agreed, or strongly agreed, that the implementation of the cross-curriculum priority is reflective of Australia’s political and economic ties with Asia. Interestingly, no participants who were interviewed stated that they used text to explore these ties between Australia and Asia. The reasons behind this varied; Mei and Mary noted that the texts they had selected were too ‘dated’ to address these ties in a contemporary context, whilst Pamela, Charlie and Dean stated that these ties were not particularly evident in the texts they had chosen. Elaine was strongly against utilising texts to focus on these ties, expressing that she thought it would be ‘unethical in an English classroom to push a political and economic agenda of the government.’ However, although Elaine thought it was unethical, Mei, Mary, Pamela and Olivia stated that it was beneficial for students to be made aware of them, with Olivia noting, ‘I think that’s really important that we teach them that, so they understand the relation – especially the economic relation – between China and Australia.’ As Mei, Mary, Pamela and Olivia have been teaching between one to five years, this may reflect that a positive attitude towards teaching students about the ties between Australia and its Asian partners is much more common amongst younger teachers. Given this, the attitudes that teachers have towards addressing the political and economic ties between Australia and Asia have implications for the way in which curriculum implementation occurs within English classrooms across New South Wales.

Curriculum implementation and addressing ‘Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia’

The research findings indicated that for teachers, the implementation of the new curriculum has resulted in significant changes to the programming undertaken by schools to ensure that they are meeting all requirements. Though the data suggested that a majority of English teachers see the value of implementing the cross-curriculum priority, some teachers feel an increased

pressure to cover what they feel is ‘additional content’. Elaine, in particular, stressed the bureaucratic nature of Australia’s education system, noting that there appears to be a disconnect between policy makers and educators. She stated:

Policymakers are rarely educators, and that is our biggest problem ... I’ve no doubt that there is consultant work done between policymakers and educators, but what is fed out to schools to implement clearly shows ... not disengagement, but ... just a total unawareness.

This response is reflective of the findings of a study conducted by Dilkes, Cunningham and Gray (2014), which examined the change fatigue experienced by teachers introducing the current *Australian F–10 Curriculum* in a government school located in Western Australia. The study found that teachers with a ‘realist’ view towards the recent Australian education policy reforms were ‘happy to explain their ideals for mandated reform, what could and should be achieved, but they always linked these ideals back to the realities of the systemic constraints they work within’ (Dilkes et al., 2014, p. 53). This notion was reflected in the response of the aforementioned participant, who noted:

If [policymakers] could envision a school day, and what a school day is like for a child, with a five or six periods a day and the breaks and the carnivals ... how comical it is to actually meet these cross-curriculum priorities as well as the course content, objectives and outcomes that are pushed through. It’s ... it’s laughable.

Whilst other participants displayed similar sentiments towards the additional planning and course time resulting from the introduction of the new curriculum and its requirements, a majority nevertheless expressed their belief that the cross-curriculum priorities were important.

The data collected from the survey responses also revealed that 78% of participants either agreed, or strongly agreed, that it is important for English students to have an understanding of the cross-curriculum priority. This was reiterated amongst the participants during the interviews, where the reasoning behind this sentiment ranged from citing the vast numbers of migrants from countries within Asia to Australia, Australia’s involvement in certain wars; particularly World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, and the increasing influence of globalisation. Olivia noted that ‘a large number of people with Asian heritage make up the population of Australia, so I think it’s important for students to have an awareness of the experiences and cultures of the people around them.’ This notion is reflected in the work of Oubani and Oubani (2014), in which they argue ‘the inclusion of the histories and experiences of certain minority

groups within the Australian school curricula has helped improve understanding and treatment of those groups’ (p. 31). In light of this, it is clear that text choice and selection plays an integral role not only in successfully addressing the cross-curriculum outcome, but enhancing students’ understanding of ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’.

Factors influencing text choice and selection

The research findings demonstrated that for participants, the main influence on selecting texts that address the cross-curriculum priority is their level of suitability for the reading and comprehension capabilities of students. This highlights that English teachers tend to prioritise choosing a text that reflects the reading and comprehension abilities of students, rather than something that they feel truly addresses ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’.

The New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) outlines in the *New South Wales K–10 English Syllabus* that in Stages 4 and 5, students must study at least two works of fiction, film, drama and nonfiction, and a wide variety of poetry (NESA, 2012, pp. 25–26). Of the seven participants interviewed, three expressed that they have experienced difficulty in choosing texts suitable for addressing the cross-curriculum priority. For Mei, Mary and Dean, the most significant factor contributing to this difficulty was accessing texts that they felt authentically addressed ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’ in a way that did not seem shallow or tokenistic. This reflects that, although NESA has published documents such as *Suggested Texts for the English K–10 Syllabus*, there seems to be a significant issue in the awareness that English teachers have of such documents. Furthermore, Mei and Mary indicated that they had experienced difficulties in accessing translated versions of texts of an Asian origin. Mei noted, ‘I would also be interested in poetry, but it might be a bit harder to source, just due to the lack of translations.’ Given that NESA outlines that Stage 4 and 5 students must study a range of differing text types, an inaccessibility of translated Asian texts may limit the genres used to address ‘Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia’, thereby limiting the extent to which English teachers are able to utilise differing text types to highlight the diversity of Asian texts. Contrastingly, Elaine – who has selected Asian poetry, newspaper articles and films that have been translated to English – utilises them as a means of teaching her students about how translations affect the meaning and context of a text.

Teachers have varying levels of autonomy in selecting the texts used within their classes to address the cross-curriculum priority. Elaine, Mei, Pamela and

Charlie expressed that they had a significant amount of autonomy when it came to choosing a text, so long as the school had relatively easy access to it, the text was suitable both for the abilities of the students and the unit it was to be used in, and it was approved by the head of faculty. This is consistent with the findings of the study undertaken by Watkins and Ostenson (2015), which examined the factors that influence English teachers' text choices, and found that teachers who felt they had a high degree of autonomy when selecting texts were still somewhat constrained 'within the context of limited budgets and issues of community and grade-level concerns about selections' (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015, p. 263). Conversely, Mary and Dean noted that they had relatively little autonomy when it came to text choice, with both participants citing that the heads of the English faculties at their respective schools were quite autocratic when it came to the selection of texts that address 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'. This limited autonomy over text choice has significant implications for English teachers, as it restricts their ability to select texts that are engaging and suitable for the contexts of their own classes. In the context of addressing 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia', this notion is highly problematic, as it can directly affect students' development of Asia literacy, thereby negating the very purpose of the cross-curriculum priority.

Conclusion and implications

Whilst a majority of English teachers see the value in addressing this cross-curriculum priority within the classes that they teach, there are significant issues in regards to them accessing key information and support materials related to this cross-curriculum priority. The study is therefore significant as it provides an insight into the attitudes that New South Wales English teachers have towards addressing the cross-curriculum priority, and how this has influenced their enactment of the *New South Wales K–10 English Syllabus*. Albright, Knezevic and Farrell (2013) found, in their study of teachers at the initial stage of implementing the new Australian English curriculum, that professional development opportunities would be the most helpful form of support for teachers implementing the new curriculum. This study established that New South Wales 7–10 English teachers are in need of more professional development opportunities in regards to addressing 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'. The study has also highlighted that English teachers need more awareness of, or greater access to, existing support documents, such as the *Suggested Texts for the English K–10 Syllabus* (2012) or the *Sample Mapping of Asia*

Opportunities in the Australian Curriculum (Asia Education Foundation, 2013).

Though the study provides a means of understanding the current attitudes of 7–10 English teachers towards addressing 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' within their classrooms, there are still significant limitations. Given the nature of the sampling methods used to recruit participants, a vast majority of those who participated in the surveys and interviews did so as their schools were addressing the cross-curriculum priority. As a result of this, the study was limited in that there was little opportunity to understand if, and why, some schools were not attempting to address 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'. Consequently, future research may focus on this area as a means of further understanding school approaches to implementing the *New South Wales K–10 English Syllabus*, and problems that arise in regards to addressing the cross-curriculum priorities. Furthermore, as this study focuses on the implementation of a national curriculum within the context of New South Wales, it does not have the capacity to reflect the attitudes that English teachers in other states may have towards implementing the cross-curriculum priority in their classrooms. As the participants all currently teach in metropolitan areas of Sydney, the study was not able to reflect the attitudes that teachers in rural areas of New South Wales may hold.

As the implementation of the *New South Wales K–10 English Syllabus* is a recent occurrence, the study has provided a valuable insight into a relatively new area of research, in which a growing body of work is starting to steadily emerge. Future studies may focus on the extent to which the political and economic agendas of governments are embedded in curriculum documents, as well as attempts of other countries to develop 'Asia literate' students, and how these are enacted through curriculum and professional practice.

The study posits that while the inclusion of 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' as a cross-curriculum priority has been clearly influenced by political and economic agendas of the Australian government, it also promotes the exploration of diverse religions, ethnicities, cultures and experiences that are reflective of the current context of the Australian population. This therefore results in students having an awareness of issues pertaining to politics, race, gender, class and religion, in both national and international contexts, that ultimately shape them as informed global citizens. Consequently, addressing the cross-curriculum priority goes beyond enabling students to develop 'Asia literacy' skills, in that it exposes them to a variety of new perspectives and experiences that may differ to

their own. In an increasingly globalised world, this knowledge will prove to be incredibly important for the future generations of Australians.

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