

## **INSIGHT DOCUMENTARY**

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**Reporter: Gael Woods**

As Asia become increasingly important on the world stage, policy makers in New Zealand and Australia say there's an urgent need to raise understanding about the region. In Australia, schools are now obliged to include Asian Studies throughout the curriculum.

Radio New Zealand's education correspondent, Gael Woods, visited Australian schools to find out how teachers, parents and students are responding.

### ASIAN CLASS SOUND EFFECTS

Learning to count in Vietnamese, St Monica's School in Footscray, close to inner city Melbourne, prides itself on its Asian Studies programme.

The suburb of Footscray was the backdrop to the 1992 movie, Romper Stomper, about racism directed at young Vietnamese immigrants.

Now, St Monica's could arguably be a model for what the Australian federal and state governments have articulated in a national policy statement, Engaging Young Australians with Asia, signed off early this year.

The statement was prepared by Australia's Asia Education Foundation which says it reflects 12 years of efforts to integrate the study of Asia throughout all school subjects.

Its executive director, Kathe Kirby, says the statement's endorsement at a ministerial level is significant.

*"To achieve a national statement on engaging young Australians with Asia is in itself a landmark agreement. What the statement lays out, in particularly the area that says what an Asia-engaged young Australian might understand, provides a guidance both for an individual teacher, for a school and for a system. So the uptake of this statement is not mandatory but all ministers of education have agreed to it and what that means is that the systems have to respond to the statement in some way."*

The foundation is part of Asialink, Australia's main organisation for the promotion of public understanding of Asian countries and Australia's role in the region.

Asialink patron, Carrillo Gantner, says one obstacle has been a lack of communication from the government to the Australian public about the critical importance of Asia to Australia's future.

*"You have to explain to people that their jobs will depend on it, that their national security will depend upon it and you have to make them realise even if they had 'just' got off the boat – 'just' in inverted commas – in recent times got off the boat from countries of Europe or other places – why it is then suddenly important to turn*

*your focus to Asia. And that is the really challenging thing – to have public perception support you.”*

The national statement says Asia's current emergence is one of history's greatest catalysts for worldwide change.

In New Zealand, a recent report by the Asian Knowledge Working Group entitled *Preparing New Zealand for an Asian Future*, says New Zealanders don't understand the region well enough, even though the country's future depends upon it.

The group, convened by the Ministry of Education and the Asia New Zealand Foundation, has set out a vision for raising the country's understanding and knowledge about Asia.

The Australian Asian Education Foundation has been grappling with the issue much longer and Kathe Kirby offers this advice.

*“One is that you’ve got to bring the education community along with you when after all it is teachers in a classroom, it is principals of a school, where this change is really going to have traction, where it is actually going to happen. So if you only work with policy makers, that’s important, but it still won’t bring about real change. So I think you’ve got to frame a rationale for this that speaks to the needs of school educators. I think that’s really important. And the second piece of advice that I would provide is that it cannot happen without investment. It has to be funded, it has to be resourced. Teachers cannot decide one day; ‘oh gosh, the Asian region is really important, I’m going to teach about Asia in my classroom,’ when if they’re an art teacher they’ve studied nothing about the arts of Asia, or if they’re a history teacher, they’ve studied nothing about the history of China. You’ve got to build the capability of your teachers and that demands funding and that’s something that we still lobby for and advocate for here. There needs to be continued investment in the professional learning of teachers if we’re truly going to achieve the studies of Asia embedded in the school curriculum content.”*

Australians, she believes, are now entering a new phase in understanding their relationship with the Asian region.

*“When we started this work in 1993, we were perceived as a fringe lobby group doing something on the margins perhaps enhancing education by introducing some exotic content into Australian kids’ schooling. Whilst we made arguments at that time of the imperative of our children knowing and understanding the Asian region, it would be true to say that that imperative was only shared by a very small group of people. By the time we came to do this statement, we had decided it was no longer necessary to make a really strong argument for why Australia needed to engage with the Asian region. That was clear. It was clear the business community had no question about it. Politically with what had transpired in our own region in the last five years – politicians weren’t going to argue with it. Parents weren’t going to argue with it and it was something that we needed then to frame in a way that was going to bring along the education community.”*

Terry Woolley from the South Australian Education Department says the best part of the statement is its acceptance nationally.

*"Every state and territory that has an education system – and we've got lots of them – they are now in some quite significant way obliged to look at this in a serious way. Ministers have signed off on it, it is a supported statement and there's an obligation albeit gentle for people like myself and the various unites from around the education departments Australia to look at this and to progress it."*

And so the gentle obligation – that's all there is at this stage...

*"Yeah, the ministers' signed off on it which means they accept its status and position. Whether at this stage a particular education department or curriculum group would say 'all schools must do this' is the next question. The minute you say all schools must, then there are questions around materials to support it, teachers that have trained in it, professional development resources – it raises a whole bunch of other questions. So when I say gentle, I mean there's a moral issue here, there's a moral obligation for our schools to make sure that our young Australians are engaged with Asia but to mandate it in some short term knee jerk way, it would be counterproductive. You have to approach this from a basis of teacher understanding, community understanding, student understanding and progress it over the next two or three years."*

So how does that actually work in schools?

#### VIETNAMESE CLASS SOUND EFFECTS

Back at St Monica's School in Melbourne, students of many ethnicities are learning Vietnamese.

*"This is just a normal class. Dimitri is Greek, Anouk is from Ethiopia, I think. Therese is Anglo-Saxon as you can see. Jessica, where are you from? Where's your mum and dad from? Portugal."*

Maggie Catterill is responsible for what the school calls Asian perspectives.

*"We have just finished a unit of work with the Grade Fours on fairy tales where we would read the Vietnamese fairy tales to them – a Cinderella, a Vietnamese Cinderella. So we do the traditional Cinderella, the Vietnamese Cinderella, the Asian Yi Shen which is the Chinese Cinderella and just give the children an idea... its subliminally shows them costumes, food, housing ... and in that way you're broadening their knowledge of Asia and Australia's place in Asia."*

Why are you doing that?

*"Why are we doing that? The children of today need to be aware of the global implications. A lot of them will actually work overseas. I have a son that's just gone to work in Kuala Lumpur. So to go over and have an understanding of the culture – the children as we say being global citizens and the world is getting smaller all the time."*

Bryan a nine-year-old Vietnamese Australian is enthusiastic about a class project.

*"We've planted these. We're learning about orangutans and Asian cultures."*

A speaker of Vietnamese, Bryan believes a second language will count for much when he finally enters the world of work.

*"Like, when like we go to work and this company is Chinese and we learn Chinese we can work there and we can like communicate."*

Maggie Catterill says the focus in schools now is global rather than the Eurocentric approach of twenty or thirty years ago.

*"Work that the children are entering in the national history competition is around the fact that it is thirty years since the first Vietnamese came to Australia and the changes that have happened to Australia because of that. So that's history. You can even bring Asian perspectives into maths if you have to by just bringing in a piece of material and the children can measure a piece of material but it can be Asian, material with Asian symbols on it. You might just talk to the children and say where do you think this might come from. It can be integrated anywhere. This is very much a primary school way of teaching."*

Flaxmill School in Adelaide is another which has made Asian studies a priority.

Airlie Cheeseman who teaches junior classes, says that means incorporating Asian references throughout the day.

*"Wherever possible we try and look at similarities and differences but mostly the similarities whenever it comes up within world news or within a topic that we are doing. We try and make sure that we incorporate that on a day to day basis but we also have an Asia week within our school, our cluster of schools, and we also had a visit by the (inaudible) monks of Tibet this year."*

Her colleague, Barbara Almond, says the visit by the Tibetan monks, which included meditation sessions for children and their parents, had a profound effect, particularly on the children's behaviour.

*"Just absolutely marvellous to see the monks out on the oval at recess at lunchtime. We had to stagger their lunches so that they could be on the oval with the children. The kids were just all over them and the monks didn't care. They picked the children up, they hugged them, it was just amazing to see."*

Airlie Cheeseman says the emphasis on Asian studies has not been questioned by parents.

*"The parents have been very keen with what we have been doing and have been very supportive and they've enjoyed coming in as we've been building our classroom with its resources and have really enjoyed with what the children have come home with and have actually learnt and they've really supported that."*

## CHOIR EFFECTS

Brighton School in Adelaide is well-known for its music and competition-winning choirs. The principal, Olivia O'Neill, says the school is trying to give a greater emphasis to Asian Studies.

*"We are a school that is wanting to become an international school and we want to internationalise the curriculum. It's a very broad topic for us. I mean in internationalising the school, we have an international committee now and we have international fee paying students and the school was resistant to having international fee paying students in the past for a whole range of reasons, not the least which was the racist reason of 'they'll be taking our places' and we've done a lot of work to increase the number of international students in the school which was a fairly mono-cultural school. I mean down near the beach in Adelaide, its a bit like the northern suburbs – they're quite Anglo – and we see that having international fee paying students obviously it's a business but it serves a purpose for us of creating a multicultural community here."*

#### ART CLASS EFFECTS

Con Preston is a visual arts teacher at the school.

*"In every aspect of my work, from year 8 to year 12, I include aspects of Asian art. Most people here in the visual arts tend to treat things just in a western perspective but because I've had quite wide experience of travelling in Asia, mainly through trips with the education department, it's inspired me, well, its allowed me to see many different things I can introduce into my curriculum to make children aware of the breadth of human culture outside our own white or Anglo-American culture."*

But, while a handful of teachers share Con Preston's enthusiasm, Olivia O'Neill says the school is only getting started on Asian Studies.

*"I think there's a lot work to be done to make it embedded right across. You see the short term visits and having China Day or like we had last year – and this year we called it International Day – are very important days in the year. They're one day in the year and we need to get past food and fashion connections to a deeper understanding."*

Others promoting Asian Studies are also concerned that celebrating national days - referred to variously as spaghetti and dance or even chomp and stomp - may be the beginning and end of schools' attempts to bring Asian studies to their students.

#### DANCE AND SONG EFFECTS

While Brighton School is a new player, McKinnon Secondary College in Melbourne has been in the game much longer. The students come from varied backgrounds, as demonstrated at this lunch-time practice of Indian dancing.

Josh, a senior student, says he signed up for Indian dancing because it looked like fun. He says the push to get Australians more interested in Asia on a national level is understandable.

*"I suppose the reason the government is saying this is that we have a large émigré population due to our low fertility rate to supplement the overall population and its just that we have to be more aware of other cultures and accepting because unlike probably fifty years ago with the White Australian policy, now everyone is allowed in and so its increasing, such as those from Asia and also the Middle East and Africa, everywhere, so its just that we have to understand that not everyone is going to be the same."*

Other students at the dance practice agree.

*"You have to realise that not everyone is going to be Australian so they're not coming from where you are coming from."*

*"There's a lot of population in Asia so there's more business over there so if you learn like a different language and culture, you can probably go to that country."*

*"I think it means that you just have to find out more about other cultures and make friends with different people."*

Mary Meyer has been promoting Asian studies at Mckinnon for several years - encouraging staff to include more Asian content in their lessons.

*"It started off twelve years ago, we joined the Asia Education Foundation at Melbourne University, we joined their Access Asia schools programme. We were one of the first schools to join and that was mainly because we were teaching Korean as a subject but from there we branched out because we realised it wasn't just important to teach an Asian language but to break down that kind of Euro centric approach to studies that we tended to have."*

So why the change? Where did that impetus come from?

*"Well it came from the Keating government in particular. His government was very focussed on having Australia have more contact with Asia and recognising that we were geographically part of Asia and that our future probably depended heavily on Asia and so they thought that it was important to go into the schools - both primary and secondary - and allow students to develop their knowledge of Asia so they would be preparing for their own future."*

Ironically, Korean classes which were the catalyst for Asia Studies at the school are now coming to an end. Here Pa has been teaching Korean for the past two years. She says funding for language teaching has been reduced considerably.

*"A lot of teachers are fighting for this funding so what they do is different from what they say."*

The irony of languages being lost in secondary schools while the federal and state governments promote a closer relationship with Asia is not lost on education groups.

A recent nationwide survey of language teacher supply undertaken by the Australian Secondary Principals Association painted a disturbing picture.

The president, Andrew Blair, says language teaching in Australian schools is probably at an all-time low with 28 per cent shedding languages.

*"We are seeing schools killing off language programmes simply because they can't guarantee supply of staff. Now I recognise that's only one part of an Asian education programme but for me it's more than a piece of symbolism. It's really important that if you are going to embrace Asia that you do it holistically and you provide language programmes as much as cultural immersion programmes."*

Carillo Gantner from Asialink is dismayed by the numbers of students learning Asian languages at school and university.

*"They are appalling. They're pathetic. And what is sad is that they have gone backwards in the last six years since the government withdrew federal funding and how can you deliver a national priority policy through seven or eight different state and territory governments. I mean it's like saying we should have national defence covered by the state governments. It is an absurdity. You can't do it. But to be fair we are now back at the starting blocks again with a new national policy for engaging Asia and for recognising the importance of language and cultural studies in our primary and secondary education. That's a great achievement but it will be meaningless if it is not resourced by state and federal governments and not really given the impetus it needs."*

The state of language learning is also of huge concern to the Australian Asian Studies Association. Association member, Meg Gurry, now a research fellow at La Trobe University in Melbourne is a former lecturer in Asian relations.

She says studies of Asia and Asian languages are in crisis.

*"In five to ten we are going to have a very big crisis because even if there was a new generation of young people that came through and they all said we all want to learn about Asian countries now and learn Asian languages, there will be fewer and fewer people to teach them. I think we've lost about twelve senior academics overseas in the last five years. Others are just retiring and they're not being replaced. If you are a Dean of Arts and you're facing a funding crisis, then it is a lot more financially sensible for you to put on another business studies course then to put on the study of Indonesian language which will get fewer students. You'll need more teachers to teach it whereas business studies might attract a large number of students and you'll get more funding."*

Dr Gurry says what's needed is a big bold government initiative.

*"What we would love to see of course is Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Education, the Prime Minister, standing up, saying we are committed to this country to training our young people in Asian languages and we will today announce the creation of a national languages institute. We've had nothing like that. Nothing. It's all what universities can scratch together."*

In the meantime, the national statement on engaging young Australians with Asia is as good as it gets.

Gillian Chadwick, the general manager of learning and development in the New South Wales department of education and training, is responsible for the implementation of the national statement into the state's schools.

She says it's not easy to implement a policy that's not compulsory and that carries no extra funding. But she says she's making an effort to champion the cause.

*"It's just such an important vehicle for helping young people be open minded, understand the hugeness and diversity of Asia which we are within."*

With a view to what?

*"With a view to being better local and global citizens, I think, in part. With a view to stepping outside what can be a very narrow mindset particularly for people who have been in Australia and haven't travelled and don't think much about what it means ... the richness of other cultures and what those things mean."*

So just specifically and in terms again of the statement, a young Australian coming out of the school system in maybe five years time, what would he or she know about Asia? What would you expect them to know?

*"It's made explicit in each of the syllabuses for primary school or high school but I guess it's the way in which you bed that down. I guess that people, like in New Zealand, coming out of the school system, you would have learnt quite a bit because there are opportunities in the syllabus particularly in the primary schools and because all around us, whether it is in the newspapers or whatever, it's Asia front and centre so often whether it is a pipeline in China or whether it is a catastrophe in India, it is very much part of the media fabric in that we live in and I guess this is just making sure that we take opportunities with young people to make sure that they see these things as important, that they develop a sense of appreciation and tolerance, you know, that they don't form lopsided views about our own worth relative to the worth of other countries, I suppose. That's part of it."*

Ms Chadwick is loathe to comment on whether a push by the federal government to get young Australians engaged with Asia is at odds with the move by the same government four years ago to axe its funding for language study.

A national body representing the Australian equivalent of school boards and parenting groups says without proper resourcing the national statement will simply be a nice idea.

Judith Bundy, a former president of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, says a recent survey of parents showed more than 80 per cent supported the engagement of their children with the Asian region.

But she says there is concern about how studies of Asia will be fitted into an already crowded curriculum.

*"They said it was a good thing, that we should certainly be concerned about being able to trade with Asia, there were security issues with Asia being such a close neighbour of Australia, and with the number of exchange students coming into Australia particularly higher education students, that it is necessary to be able to get on with those students and understand their cultures but at the same time when it actually came to teaching of studies of Asia at a grass roots school level, then there were some concerns about how that would actually happen and what would have to fall off. They make comments like I don't want my child learning about studies of Asia or learning an Asian language when they can't even speak their own language English very well."*

Andrew Chisholm who's the assistant principal of Melbourne's McKinnon Secondary School says while schools acknowledge the importance of Asia to their students' futures, there are many other pressures on teaching time. So how realistic is a national statement which advocates that that studies of Asia will achieve a status comparable with other studies traditionally included in the curriculum?

*"In some ways yes it is realistic. But the model that we use to deliver that isn't as straight forward as it seems. So it is more a school-based decision as to how you do that."*

Wayne Stevenson, a New Zealander, who's spent a large part of his working life in Australia, is the chief financial officer for the Asia Pacific region of the ANZ bank.

He says a closer relationship with Asia for New Zealand as well as Australia is increasingly important.

*"We have seen a huge growth in the connectivity between Australia and Asia. There have been lots of difficulties in the past with some countries – Indonesia, Malaysia, that sort of thing. But a lot of those difficulties have been superseded if you like as we've gone into the last three or four years. If you just look at the prospects for the world, the growth in China is sort of 10 to 12 percent per annum. It is going to be the biggest economy in the world and sitting on the edge of that, you cannot help but be sucked into that and if you get into that vortex, if you like, the right way, then you'll do well out of it. If you try and resist it and stay out of it, then you will not capture the growth that's actually there."*

Wayne Stevenson says the future is Asia.

*"If you think about the world going forward, in ten years time it is going to be dominated by Asian economies and Asian influence and if they aren't prepared for that, they don't understand the cultural norms, they're not prepared or able to speak some of the languages, then they are going to be increasingly irrelevant in that context. Starting early at five year olds when their mind is active and seeking information, seeking knowledge, to get them interested in that is incredibly important."*

Andrew Blair from the Australian Secondary Principals Association says the stakes are very high.

*"If Australian young people are not immersed in Asian culture and language then we are at risk of creating a generation that will not be competitive in a global economy."*

The report, Preparing New Zealand for an Asian Future, says the choice is either to adapt to a changing world or get left behind.

**ENDS**