



Asia Education Foundation



Views of Members of the Executive of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and Australian Parents Council (APC) on Studies of Asia in Australian Schools

A study commissioned by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) in partnership with the ACSSO and APC

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Solved at McConchie Pty Ltd

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Views of Members of the Executives of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and Australian Parents Council (APC) on studies of Asia in Australian Schools

Executive Summary

a) The Study

This study was commissioned by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) in partnership with the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents Council (APC). Funding was provided by the AEF. It is a scoping study in that the target group for the survey was limited to members of the executives of ACSSO and the APC. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the attitude of these parents in government and non-government schools towards the place of studies of Asia as a cross-curriculum initiative in Australian schools. It was also designed to inform the three organisations about how they may work together to develop strategies to ensure that studies of Asia penetrate school programs in a way that is broader, deeper and more sustained across schools than is the case at present.

The issue of Australia's relationship with Asia has been on the political agenda for a considerable time. The Australian Government, through the Department of Education, Science and Training formally recognised the importance of Australia's engagement with Asia by supporting the establishment of the AEF in 1992. Since then the AEF has supported education systems, schools and teachers to develop curriculum materials and teacher expertise central to the development of good relationships between the peoples of Australia and Asia.

The AEF is of the view that it is increasingly important that all Australian students possess knowledge of the Asia region and Australia's interaction with the region. While the economic, social and cultural imperatives that have driven the studies of Asia for the past 14 years remain, the rationale for studies of Asia has been strengthened by a changed and heightened security environment, developments in the Asia region that demand more informed and sophisticated understandings and responses and the impact of Asia on Australia's cultural and social landscape. This project, by seeking the views of key parent representatives on the place of studies of Asia in Australian schools is an important first step in building a collaborative response to these emerging needs.

300 members of the executives from ACSSO and APC received surveys. 137 responses were received and analysed. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 11 respondents to seek further information and clarification.

b) Significant Findings

Parents strongly support policy initiatives to engage Australia and Australians with Asia, for example:

- 88% believed that the government should have a long term strategic plan to implement such a policy
- 92% acknowledged the importance of the business and economic ties linking Australia with the countries of Asia
- 91% believed that an important skill for all Australians to possess is an ability to communicate across cultures. 60% of parents responded that they would like their child to learn an Asian language
- 82% said that Australians needed to understand China as well as they understood Britain and the USA, although India did not feature as prominently in their thinking

- Approximately 74% agreed with the proposition that good relationships with Asian countries would assist in maintaining Australia's long term security

Australian culture and society

In terms of the development of Australian culture and society, some 80% believed that people from Asia have played a significant role in shaping modern Australia; that Asian immigrants enrich our culture (86%) and that Australian society will continue to evolve as it responds to a growing Asian influence (79%).

Despite this, 85% felt that many Australians did not understand Asian peoples and their cultures. Although 63% thought that there could be a conflict between Australian and Asian values, only 9% agreed with the proposition that we could learn more from developed European nations than from developed Asian nations. Interestingly, in this sample of national and state parent leaders, there was only 1 person in the study who claimed to have an Asian background, with 60% of respondents also believing that parents of Asian extraction were under-represented on school decision making bodies.

Parent involvement in schools

This sample of parents want and expect to be involved in their children's schools with 94% stating that they should have a role in working with teachers on broad curriculum issues and decisions. Only 13% said that they would be comfortable in leaving all curriculum decisions to their children's teachers. The reality is however that less than 50% of schools routinely involve parents in their decision-making processes, and less than 20% of parents have participated in any discussions about studies of Asia in their children's schools. The fact that 80% of parents endorsed the proposition that all students should have the opportunity of learning an Asian language whilst at school is evidence that they see benefits for their children and those of future generations in being able to relate to this region.

Role of parent associations

65% believed that national and state parent associations should have policies on the teaching of studies of Asia in Australian schools. 76% thought that an understanding of Asia would be an asset when their children enter the workforce, and 60% said that they would be concerned if their child's school did not engage their children with Asia through the curriculum. 68% supported an on-going teacher professional development program, whilst 72% agreed that each state and territory should monitor the level of provision of studies of Asia programs in their respective jurisdictions.

Studies of Asia in schools

Despite acknowledging the need for Australians to engage with Asia, and the role that schools can play in supporting this imperative, a significant proportion of parents had difficulty in assessing how studies of Asia could be incorporated into the curriculum, with 58% stating that they would have difficulty in assigning a priority to it. Some 45% preferred that studies of Asia be regarded as an optional element of the curriculum. This response pattern, which also featured between 20% and 30% of respondents choosing to remain neutral on specific questions, seemed to arise from multiple interpretations of the term "studies of Asia", some of which did not reflect the cross-curriculum model preferred by the AEF. Follow up telephone interviews confirmed the view that most parents are unfamiliar with the work of the AEF.

c) Recommendations for Future Action

Developing strategies to move forward in a collaborative way between the three organisations is not only desirable but possible, and may involve a number of different ways, on a number of different levels. Parents strongly articulated the need for Australia to positively engage with Asia, as a national priority. Co-existing with this general view, was a degree of reluctance to provide the same level of support for the incorporation of studies of Asia into the school curriculum. It is likely that the predominant reason explaining this reticence is that parents did not share a common understanding of the term "studies of Asia". Although many did grasp the concept of it being a cross-curriculum initiative, for some it was seen as a new subject, or even as a compulsory language. In the context of a school curriculum which is very crowded, it can be seen why

there would be less than full support for something seen as an extra to be somehow accommodated. A number of parents expressed a view that there could be some conflict with studies of Asia and the delivery of the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. Amongst those who did appreciate the ways in which it could be integrated into existing curricula, some raised the issue of balance in relation to studies of other regions of the world, whilst others expressed doubts in relation to academic rigour.

This leads to a conclusion that for parents to be in a position to provide their strong support for the work of the AEF, they need to have a clear understanding of the nature of studies of Asia. They need to understand what it is and what it is not. They need to understand how it can be resourced and how they can influence policies such as teacher preparation and in-service programs. Parents also need to be informed about the role of the AEF in promoting this aspect of the curriculum.

Ten recommendations that address the above issues are provided for consideration. These are:

i) Establish an Implementation Group

The AEF should convene a small implementation group to discuss, develop and prioritise actions that flow from this study. This group should be convened and chaired by the AEF, as it is the lead partner with the major responsibility for implementing studies of Asia in schools.

ii) Develop an Information/Communication Strategy

The December 2005 release of the National Statement for Engaging Young Australians with Asia in Australian Schools is an ideal vehicle for opening dialogue with parent organisations on a wider scale than has been attempted previously. Parents are mentioned in the statement, so it would seem imperative to put them in the picture as early as possible in 2006.

In order for parents to be in a position to provide their strong support to the AEF, they need to have a clear understanding of the nature of studies of Asia. They need to understand what it is and what it is not. They need to understand how it can be resourced and how they can influence policies such as teacher preparation and in-service programs.

At the same time as talking about the National Statement, an information package outlining some of the key findings of the present study could be produced and disseminated. This group could also produce the text of a short publication which clearly defines studies of Asia, outlines the benefits of incorporating studies of Asia in the school curriculum and strategies to address barriers to the introduction of such programs.

iii) Commission Targeted Research

This study has pointed to the diversity of parental opinion around the concept of studies of Asia. Regionally distinct attitudes towards studies of Asia may well exist. Different schools will be at different stages of readiness to embrace studies of Asia. The AEF may want to assess the readiness of schools by commissioning some regionally based targeted research. For example, an analysis of schools which are involved in studies of Asia programs may reveal that there is little uptake in particular areas in particular States. Why is this? Are there particular attitudinal or other reasons for this level of uptake? What are the general community attitudes? Parent organisations could contribute to such research by assisting with the design of any survey instruments, provide contact details and possibly assist with some data gathering. Results of this kind of targeted research would provide the AEF with a better understanding of the local factors which may assist or act as barriers to the implementation of studies of Asia in particular locations.

iv) Collaboratively Develop Curriculum

The AEF has established over time a sophisticated mechanism for developing and evaluating new curriculum. A gap in this process however is the formal involvement of parents. The Implementation Group

should look at ways to incorporate parental views, to make curriculum development a more collaborative exercise. Parents could have an appropriate level of input into;

- identifying gaps in the suite of available curriculum materials
- supporting change by identifying existing good teaching practice at the local level, with a view to the AEF documenting this for dissemination to other schools
- existing structures or groups that are used in the process of updating existing curriculum materials or in the production of new curriculum materials.

v) Involve Asian Parents

ACSSO and the APC could jointly or separately discuss and develop strategies to increase the involvement of parents of Asian backgrounds on school decision making bodies. Any strategies developed are likely to be in conjunction with state affiliates, and should be seen as part of a broader process to involve parents of all ethnicities in decision making processes.

vi) Conferences and Workshops

All parent organisations hold national and state conferences, as well as regular executive meetings. The work of the AEF could be explained in these forums. The Implementation Group could investigate applying for a grant to run a studies of Asia national conference, perhaps backing on to another national conference.

vii) Involve Parents in AEF Activities

Parent organisations could be invited to nominate representatives to receive information from the AEF. This could be formalized into AEF/Parent Information Network

These people could be linked to the State Advisers, and operate as a support and information exchange network. If funds were available, these people could meet once or twice a year.

Secondly, and in line with research findings on the importance of family/school partnerships as acknowledged by the Australian Government, funding could be provided for a limited number of parent places at teacher professional development programs – a parent could attend with a teacher from the same school. This parent would be expected to report back to a meeting of their Governing Council and P&C or P&F group.

viii) Publications

Both ACSSO and the APC publish newsletters. The AEF could provide regular copy for these publications, or authorise re-publication of items from its own newsletter. With the assistance of the parent organisations, the AEF should ensure that its own newsletter reaches all parent representatives in each State and Territory. As indicated in the response to one of the survey questions, parents would support the AEF in publicising examples of excellent studies of Asia programs.

ix) Play an Advocacy Role

The national parent organisations have an opportunity for influencing the Federal Government and bodies such as Teaching Australia and the Australian Principals' Association Professional Development Council. Issues such as resourcing, special grants, teacher training and professional development initiatives could be raised with these bodies. State parent bodies could also play a similar role with local jurisdictions and universities involved with teacher preparation and professional development. They may also want to invite their local education authority/Minister to provide a status report on the uptake of studies of Asia programs in their State/Territory.

x) Develop Policy

ACSSO and the APC could consider formulating policies that mirror and complement the National Statement. Such policies should be accompanied by action plans.