

## **Othering or Inclusion?**

### **Teacher practice around Asian voices and identities in Literature**

#### *Abstract*

One of the priorities of the Australian Curriculum is concerned with developing Asia literacy, namely 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia'. In terms of the English curriculum, an emphasis is placed on the representation of Asian voices and characters in literature that is studied in the classroom. However, previous research undertaken in schools to explore the use of multicultural literature by teachers has demonstrated an uncritical approach to literature – with teachers tending to set up binary opposites of 'Australian' and 'the Other'. This paper will present the complexities of practice with Asian literature as represented through research with Tasmanian teachers. It will examine the factors that influence teachers to use Asian literature, their selection of Asian literature, and their classroom practice with Asian literature. Finally it makes some recommendations for a stronger future whereby Asian peoples, voices and stories are integrated more inclusively and critically in teachers' everyday practice.

## **Introduction and Research context: Australian policies about Asia Literacy**

Over the past decade, the Australian Government has made a number of policies to ensure that young Australians will become Asia literate as Asia is Australia's neighbour. Those important policies include the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians in 2008*, which emphasizes the importance of engaging with Asian nations in the era of global integration and international mobility. The document highlights that 'India, China and other Asian nations are growing and their influence on the world is increasing. Australians need to become 'Asia literate', engaging and building strong relationships with Asia' (Ministerial, Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008, p.4). Other national documents include the 2011 White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century* and *the National Statement on Asia Literacy in Australian Schools 2011-2012* which also support the inclusion of Asia literacy education to prepare students for success in today's globalized world. The 2011 White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century in 2011* states that

Asia's rise is changing the world. This is a defining feature of the 21st century—the Asian century ...The Asian century is an Australian opportunity....Our nation also has the strength that comes from a long history of engagement with countries in Asia... Australia is located in the right place at the right time—in the Asian region in the Asian century. (Australian Government, 2011, p.1)

This White Paper also details how, by 2025, Australia can be a winner in this Asian century. And Prime Minister Julia Gillard also 'calls on all of us to play our part in becoming a more Asia-literate and Asia-capable nation' (Australian Government, 2011, p.1).

Within the Tasmanian context where the researchers of this project are based and the present research was conducted, the 2013 White Paper, *Tasmania's Place in the Asian Century* emphasizes the crucial importance of engagement with Asia to enhance Tasmania's

opportunities in the global market. It outlines the many challenges that Tasmania faces in the Asian century compared with other states in the nation. It states that Tasmania ‘is less well equipped to engage with Asia than other states in Australia as a result of relatively limited existing economic links and a more homogenous community’ (Tasmanian Government, 2013, p.3). As a result, ‘goals of socioeconomic and cultural enrichment will be difficult to achieve without increasing the awareness and recognition by the Tasmanian community of Asia, Asia’s culture’ (Tasmanian Government, 2013, p.3). This White Paper also acknowledges the complexity and diversity of Asian histories, backgrounds and cultures and stresses the importance of Tasmania’s engagement with Asia reflecting this diversity (Tasmanian Government, 2013).

The importance of engaging with Asia and developing Australian students’ literacy about Asia has become one of the cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian Curriculum under the heading ‘*Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia*’ (ACARA, 2015a) and ‘intercultural awareness’ is one of the general capabilities of Australian students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (ACARA, 2015b). While all Australian curriculum learning areas have the potential to contribute to the Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia cross-curriculum priority, in the *Australian Curriculum: English*, ‘students can explore and appreciate the diverse range of traditional and contemporary texts from and about the peoples and countries of Asia, including texts written by Australians of Asian heritage’ (ACARA, 2016). And in the Literature Strand which is one of the three strands of the *Australian Curriculum: English*, students explore representation of Asian voices and characters (ACARA, 2016).

### **Literature Review: Themes from the Literature**

In the research literature, three consistent themes were present. These included: (1) the tensions and ambiguities as to what Asia actually means; (2) ideological issues about the representation of Asian cultures in literature; and (3) a prevailing issue related to the uncritical

use of literature related to Asian cultures and peoples in classroom contexts. Furthermore, the research literature presented similar calls to action for teachers to be more integrative in their approaches to Asian literature in the classroom, and to consider Asia as ‘part of Australia’s backyard’ (Weinmann, 2015, p. 194). These themes will be discussed below.

Whilst policy and curricula documents argue the importance for teachers to become ‘Asia literate’ and use Asian literature in the classroom, what is meant by ‘Asia’ is problematic on two levels. One level is that Asia itself is rooted in geographical notions that actually span almost 50 countries over 44 million square kilometres. The Australian curriculum also draws on a geographical definition of Asia, limiting it to 24 countries within the sub-regions of North-East, South-East and South Asian regions (ACARA, 2013). As Bullen and Lunt (2015) argue:

It [the curriculum] excludes countries like Afghanistan and Iran and, therefore, a significant body of recent Australian and international multicultural children’s literature. The currently limited availability of picture books representing the diversity of Asia is therefore of particular import to Australian educators.

Bullen and Lunt (2015, p. 161)

Even the limited 24 countries reflect a wide diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages – and no single country is entirely homogeneous, being made up of a multiplicity of peoples, cultures and languages. Halse raises the question ‘What is meant by ‘Asia’: a location, a geographical formation, or an ethnic, cultural, or a linguistic identity?’ (2015, p. 1) and argues that the term ‘Asia’ serves as problematic for two reasons: (1) it is ‘...a label that erases the diversity within and across multiple cultures and societies into a single, homogenized entity’ (Halse, 2015, p. 2), and (2) it is a ‘...construct that differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them’ and thereby perpetuates Orientalist notions of Asia as exotic, foreign, and ‘Other’

to Australia?’ (Halse, 2015, p. 2). This idea of ‘us’ and ‘them’ leads to the second problematic level.

The second level is that of the Asia-Australian relationship. Iwabuchi (2015) states that ‘a clearly demarcated dichotomy between Australia and Asia is conceptually and epistemologically problematic’ (p. xv), arguing that Australia is a multicultural society, populated by people of Asian heritage, and that Australia already has interconnections, networks and flows with and between Asia. Koh (2013) also notes that: ‘Australians have not seized the opportunities to know the representations of Asians in their own country, let alone Asia. If Australia wants to know Asia . . . it has to begin to know the cultural Other in its own backyard’ (Koh 2013, p. 86). Indeed, Iwabuchi (2015) argues that as Australians, we need to contest the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, by asking ourselves ‘...how ‘us’ has been perceived in a particular way that does not embrace ‘them’ as being with or part of ‘us’ (p. xvi). Furthermore, Weinmann (2015) proposes a re-theorisation of what is meant by Asia to that of ‘a hybrid geographical, social and cultural space,’ and one in which there exists a cultural flow (Appardurai, 2013). Weinmann (2015) suggests that Australian teachers could be better placed for both themselves and their students becoming Asia literate by shifting their own conceptualisation of Asia. Rather than a false ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, she suggests teachers position themselves ‘within a hybrid ‘Asiascape’ (Weinmann, 2015, p. 184). Asia has had a long historical relationship with Australia, and indeed, Asian immigrants played a significant role in Australian history. In summary, Asia is a complex, hybrid cosmopolitan of peoples, cultures and languages, and Australian is also a complex, hybrid cosmopolitan of peoples, cultures and language with Asian histories and influences embedded into the fabric of its identity. This exemplifies the reasons why becoming ‘Asia literate’ requires a rethinking of geographical boundaries as porous, and of Australian identity as inclusive of the elements of its Asian heritage and influences.

In terms of children's literature from Asia, the central issue raised in the research literature was ideological, in terms of the representation of Asian peoples and cultures in literature. Leong and Woods (2017, p. 376) argue that there is a latent 'Orientalism' manifested in the representation of Asian characters. The term Orientalism originated from Said (1978), who argued that Western attitudes towards Eastern cultures and peoples viewed them as exotic, primitive and inferior. This attitude serves to mark Eastern peoples as 'the other', where 'the other' not only implied different and inferior, but rationalised a Western imperialist attitude that historically aimed to oppress and conquer the Eastern world. Rodriguez and Kim (2017) drew on critical Asian race theory to analyse American children's picturebooks. Critical Asian race theory is underpinned by those ideas first raised by Said (1978) and is based on the premise that 'racial inequality permeates every aspect of social life' (Rodriguez & Kim, 2017, p. 19). Rodriguez and Kim found that many American picturebooks did represent Asian peoples and cultures as this stereotype of the exotic foreigner. A second stereotype found in the representation was that of Asian characters being overachieving model minorities, and a third stereotype was that of struggling immigrants. These three tropes: exotic foreigners, model overachievers and struggling immigrants, all serve to mark difference, often in highly negative ways, as opposed to equality, respect and intercultural understanding.

Research into representation of Asian characters and people in picturebooks published in Australia is limited, but some researchers have also uncovered problematic examples of manifest othering. For example, Bullen and Lunt (2015) analyse the autobiographical picture book, *The Little Refugee* (Do, Do & Whatley, 2011), which recounts selected events from the childhood of Vietnamese-Australian Anh Do. They argue that the implied reader of the picture book is not a Vietnamese child, but a child who has never been to Vietnam,

positioning them as an outsider to Vietnamese culture. They cite the introduction of Do and Whatley's text:

I was born in a faraway country called Vietnam. It's a crazy place –  
strange food, snakes in bottles, five people squashed onto the back of  
one little motorbike!

They argue that this is problematic:

This first-person introduction directly addresses a reader who lives in a country 'faraway' from Vietnam. The verbal text leaves a reader unfamiliar with Vietnamese culture with little option but to believe the author when he asserts that Vietnam is 'a crazy place'. The implication that this (Asian) place is 'crazy' relative to other (Western) places is later made explicit when, on the first page of the second half of the book, Australia is referred to as a 'great country'. The parallel phrasing constructs a binary opposition that emphasises Asia as exotic, culturally distant, and different to Australia. (Bullen & Lunt, 2015, p. 157).

Further, they analyse the images and identify that the visual contrast between representations of Vietnam and Australia showed Vietnam in a negative light, with Australia being represented as '...a cleaner, safer, more civilised, and better place to live than Vietnam' (Bullen & Lunt, 2015, p. 160). This once again reflects an attitude of Orientalism, whereby the Vietnamese peoples and cultures are being represented as inferior. Another point made by Bullen and Lunt (2015) was how a comparison of Do's adult memoir, *The Happiest Refugee* (Do, 2010) and the picturebook *The Little Refugee* revealed that the picturebook version glossed over, erased or altered both his story and its historical, cultural

and social context, choosing to sanitise the story for a younger audience. This raises further questions about the authenticity of representation in memoirs written for a younger audience. There are pedagogical challenges and tensions for the use of memoir to interpret the past – these tensions being the issues of ‘authenticity’, ‘representation’, and ‘fiction’. Such tensions around how ‘creative interpreters’ of history interpret the past, particularly when writing for a child audience, should be something teachers are aware of when working with such texts in the classroom, in order to use them critically.

The third theme from the literature related to the ways in which teachers are using Asian literature in their classrooms. Derman-Sparks (1993) first coined the term ‘tourist multiculturalism’ to describe and critique a pedagogical approach to multiculturalism which involved the occasional detour from the ‘normal’ curriculum to discuss another culture. She is cited by Abdullah (2009), who argues, ‘[t]hese tour and detour methods trivialize, patronize, and stereotype cultures by emphasizing traditional costumes, foods, and dances while avoiding the true picture of the everyday life of the people from that culture (Derman-Sparks 1993)’ (Abdullah, 2009, p. 159). Rodriguez and Kim (2015) argue that this extends to the use of Asian literature. They note that teachers from P-12 classrooms are typically using Asian literature in uncritical ways. They suggest that typically teachers will use Asian literature on special occasions, and focus on heroes, food and festivals. Bullen and Lunt (2015) argue that what is urgently needed is for teachers to take a critical approach that includes an understanding of how text and images work to position young readers.

These three interrelated themes: (1) the tensions and ambiguities as to what Asia actually means; (2) ideological issues about the representation of Asian cultures in literature; and (3) the uncritical use of literature related to Asian cultures and peoples in classroom contexts, led to our research questions. Our overarching question was: How are Tasmanian teachers using Asian literature in their classrooms? We wanted to hear their stories, and

identify how they were using literature to address the cross-curriculum imperative of Asia literacy. We wanted to know how they were using literature within their considerably mono-cultural classrooms in ways to foster genuine and authentic understandings about Asian peoples and cultures. We wanted to know whether they faced any challenges in their work with children around literature, and we wanted to hear their stories of success. To answer this, we asked three specific research questions:

1. What factors influence Tasmanian teachers' use of Asian literature?
2. What choices do Tasmanian teachers make when selecting Asian literature?
3. What kinds of approaches do Tasmanian teachers take when using literature and how might these approaches be inclusive or othering?

The overall aim of this research was to determine what we could learn that would further support teachers to work critically with Asian literature and reimagine the complexities of Asian peoples and cultures.

## **Methodology**

To answer the above research questions, this research mainly employed a qualitative research approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2012), focusing on Tasmanian teachers' practices of Asian literature as a case study. However, before interviewing interested Tasmanian teachers to identify the factors influencing Tasmanian teachers' use of Asian literature, the choices they made and the approaches they took, a nation-wide survey was distributed to primary and secondary teachers via professional forums and mailing lists to gain an overview of the status of using Asian literature by Australian teachers throughout the nation. This survey included demographic information and multiple choice questions about the Asian countries included in teachers' use of Asian literature and the purpose of using Asian literature in their classrooms. Ethics approval was sought from the ethics committees at the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Department of Education for survey and interview participation.

The number of survey responses was not as high as we expected, but after two rounds of posting finally 20 enthusiastic educators completed the survey. Following this, five in-depth interviews with five interested Tasmanian teachers across year levels from Year 1 to Year 12 were conducted. The interviews were then transcribed by a research assistant and the transcriptions were sent back to the interviewees for review. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was employed to analyse the transcriptions of the interviews to answer the identified research questions.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Survey results**

Before sharing the results from the interviews to answer the research questions, the following section will share a bit information about the survey participants and their purpose for using Asian literature and the Asian countries they have included.

#### ***Survey participants' demographic information***

The survey results show that most of the participants who completed the survey were from New South Wales and Tasmania, which accounted for 85% in total. While 5% of the participants came from Victoria, and 10% other/outside Australia. The participants were teachers at different year levels, including 35% from primary schools (Years 1 to 6), and 65% from secondary schools and colleges. Regarding their experience, 79% of the participants had more than 8 years of experience in their teaching, and only 21% of them had 3 years or less than 3 years teaching experience. The majority of them completed a Bachelor or Masters' degree.

#### ***Asian countries included in teachers' use of Asian literature***

As we argued above, defining Asia in geographical terms is problematic. Yet, since the curriculum defines it thus, we wanted to get a sense of where teachers stood on this, and which Asian countries, geographically speaking, they included when addressing the

curriculum priority. To be able to identify the Asian countries included in teachers' use of Asian literature, it is important to define Asia as defining Asia has been considered complex. In fact, 'Asia can be defined in geographical terms, but it can also be described in terms of cultural, religious, historical and language boundaries or commonalities' (The Australian Curriculum, 2019). Although, geographically Asia includes West and Central Asia, in Australian schools, studies of Asia are encouraged to give attention to the countries in: (1) **North-East Asia** (e.g. China, Japan, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea and Taiwan); (2) **South-East Asia** (e.g., Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam; and (3) **South Asia** (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) (The Australian Curriculum, 2019). Based on the curriculum, these countries were included in the survey. The findings from the survey show that teachers included a variety of Asian countries/regions in their teaching of Asian literature, but the top three popular countries are China, Japan and Vietnam. Other second countries consist of India, Cambodia, Indonesia, North Korea, Korea and Singapore.

### ***Teachers' purpose for using Asian literature***

The survey results indicate that primary and secondary teachers used Asian literature for a number of purposes, but teaching about Asian place, peoples, cultures and histories to promoting cross-cultural understandings was the number one purpose, accounting for 42% of the survey respondents. The second purpose was to make students aware of social and international issues like war, refugees, immigration, gender, race, environment, etc., which accounted for 24% of the responses. Only 13% of the survey participants stated that they used Asian literature to teach literary genres or concepts, and a small number of them used Asian literature for pleasure (7%), critical literacy (7%) and for other purposes or a combination of the above purposes (7%).

## Interview results

### *Research question 1: What factors influence Tasmanian teachers' use of Asian literature?*

The findings from the interviews show that factors influencing their use of Asian literature, include curriculum imperatives, personal values, school-based initiatives, teacher exchanges, study tours, personal experience in Asia, interactions with Asian communities. Some selected quotes have been provided as follows.

- *And that year the principal, she actually organized a study tour for teachers who'd never been to Asia. And I was lucky enough to go. (Penelope, Year 6)*
- *We'd put in a submission and won some money that had to be spent on purchasing books to enhance the study of Asian culture. (Penelope, Year 6)*
- *In 2012 I was asked if I would like to go to China on an education trip, and I said, 'Absolutely.' (Diana, Year 6)*

Our finding is consistent with Weinmann's findings in 2015 that links to Asian communities, Asian-related experiences including work, study, travel, family, school connections to Asia are the key factors for the involvement and commitment to teaching and learning about Asia. That may explain why there is a lack of engagement with Asian literature in an English classroom if a teacher does not have any links to or experience about Asia. For example, this teacher said:

*If I had an Asian child in my room, I've tried to do a lot more, same as if they'd come from anywhere, I'd try to incorporate their cultural heritage, because that's a way of being inclusive and developing that sense of belonging. I don't have any children like that at the moment in my class, though. (Natalie, Year 1)*

The response was commendable as this teacher wanted to ensure that if there was any Asian student in her classroom, they would have the opportunity to maintain their cultural heritage as she would acknowledge and incorporate their history, values and cultural traditions in her

English classroom. However, due to the lack of Asian students in her classroom, she did not use Asian literature as a mainstream practice, although this is a cross-curriculum priority. Natalie was engaging in the practice of ‘tourist multiculturalism’ – taking a detour to visit Asian literature once in a while depending on the demographics of her class. In Tasmania this is particularly dangerous given the low non-white demographics to be found in any classroom. The response by Natalie was a wake-up call to us as researchers. It raises an urgency to stress to teachers the necessity of engaging with Asia in the English Strand of the Australian Curriculum as mainstream, rather trying out occasionally, to meet the demand for educating all Australian children to become Asia literate in the Asian century – the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, 2011).

***Research question 2: What choices do Tasmanian teachers make when selecting Asian literature?***

In our information sheet for participants, we had deliberately left out a single definition for what constituted ‘Asian literature’, as we did not want to limit teachers’ responses when asking how they addressed the cross-curriculum priority. Our findings uncovered three common approaches to selecting ‘Asian literature’ to meet that priority. There was a relatively equal distribution of literature from each of these three choices. These are listed below.

1. Selecting Australian literature which included the representation of Asian characters and cultures (for example in the novel *Jasper Jones*, there is a Vietnamese character, Jeffrey Lu). This approach was taken by teachers in upper primary and secondary school.
2. Selecting literature with Asian-Australian representation and authorship (for example, *The Little Refugee*). This literature is commonly termed ‘Asian-Australian’ literature, and we had expected it to be the most typical choice by teachers, given the resources developed by the Asian-Australian Children's Literature and Publishing (AACLAP)

project (Mallan, Borchert & Henderson, 2011-214), the resources provided by *Reading Australia* (2019), the attention that has been given to Asian-Australian children's literature in the research literature (e.g. Henderson & Jetnikoff, 2013; Jetnikoff, 2013; Mallen, Henderson, Cross & Allen, 2014; Henderson, Mallen & Allan, 2013) and the profile it has reached in public discourse (e.g. Mallan, 2013). This approach was taken by upper primary and secondary teachers.

3. Literature from an Asian author not living in Australia, but written or translated into English (for example manga, and the animated films of Studio Ghibli, such as *Spirited Away*). This approach was taken by all teachers.

The range of literature used was diverse, including picturebooks, short stories, fiction, non-fiction, animated film, graphic novels, manga, poetry, plays (wayang kulit), and oral narratives from sites such as YouTube.

***Research question 3: What kinds of approaches do Tasmanian teachers take when using literature and how might these approaches be inclusive or othering?***

We asked teachers to articulate the ways in which they used Asian literature (regardless of how they defined that), and as expected, most teachers outlined very rich programs of work around responding to literature in creative ways. For example, Diana used drama strategies to help students position themselves in the role of the characters. Diana used drama to explore *The Little Refugee* and bring to life scenes in the boat to understand the refugee experience.

*So The Little Refugee, I did a whole unit on. I did a schema of journey, so push, the journey, and settlement; the three parts to the schema. My whole focus was around doing The Little Refugee for the journey. We did drama out of it. We mapped it on the floor, and we hopped in the space. Yeah, so nine metres by two metres is not very*

big. And there were 40 people on the boat, and we couldn't move. So then we discussed, how do you go to the toilet? How did you sleep? What happens when someone was sick? Where did it go? Where did the babies play? It was really quite good. We did a lot of poetry writing about it. We used the book, then, to prompt our poetry writing and getting our feelings, and the emotions of what it'd be like on the boat. (Diana, Year 6)

Other teachers were keen to help students make connections with the characters in literature, such as Jeff:

*The Lion* text, I use that because the children can, 'Ah, that boy, he lived in Hobart.' And they actually draw that parallel from there too. So it's basically just getting those links to their own lives and expanding that.  
(Jeff, Year 5)

Not all teachers approached the teaching Asian literature in an inclusive way. For example, *Natalie* intimated that she tended to only occasionally used Asian literature, and when she did, she focussed on ideas such as clothing, food and festivals. Whilst teaching these explicit aspects of culture is appropriate, when they are the sole focus of occasional study of Asian literature, this approach tends to reflect the idea of 'tourism multiculturalism', whereby only differences are identified, and Asian cultures are 'othered'.

We don't use a lot [of Asian literature], but the ones that we do use include Asian themes, you know? Things like celebrations with

children around the world, I'm in a year one classroom, so that's a subject that comes up. Things that connect with food, we've done books like *Dim Sum for Everyone*, *Suki's Kimono*, festivals, you know, *The Lantern Festival*, *I Live in Tokyo*, they're ones that we've accessed either from our library or we sometimes access a lot either from YouTube, through Epic Books and things like that. (*Natalie*, Kindergarten- Year 1)

This teacher is certainly addressing part of the curriculum requirement – which clearly states, ‘In the Australian Curriculum: English, students can explore and appreciate the diverse range of traditional and contemporary texts from and about the peoples and countries of Asia’ (ACARA, 2016). Furthermore, we would expect teachers of younger children to focus on explicit aspects of culture as children become more aware of the world around them, whilst teachers of older children would investigate the more implicit aspects of culture. However it is important to be aware of only focussing on themes that mark difference, regardless of the year level, but it is problematic that only those themes that mark difference are discussed.

Caroline, a secondary teacher, focussed on helping students acknowledge that Australia was a multicultural society, and on how all Australians experienced ‘being Australian’ in diverse ways.

So one of the big things we do, we look at Australian identity and the complexity of that. And I really love that, with the year sevens talking about the complexity of Australian identity. They write a comparative essay about their experiences of being Australian. And because you've talked about that definition, you can talk about how their friends treat

them, how their families treat them. So we structure in that sense.

What's it like for their families? And they can talk about the parents, who are quite traditional. I want to normalize [the fact that Asian Australians are just Australians]. I want students to know that we're all just part of multicultural Australia. So that's probably my biggest hope is to just, rather than the stereotypes ...or a romanticism of the past or ancient times, just to say no, this is what Australia looks like, with [people like Jeffrey Lu... he is Australian as well]. You know, characters like that [Jeffrey Lu] in *Jasper Jones*: that's Australia.

We're talking 1960s. That's Australia. You can go back and talk about the Gold Rush - you can remind them that Chinese immigrants have been here since the 1850s. (Caroline, Years 7-12)

In summary, our interviews uncovered a range of teaching approaches that included making connections with, responding to, and examining the representation of Asian characters and cultures in literature. What was surprising was that the tendency of almost all teachers was to primarily focus pedagogy on response, rather than critical engagement with literature. These practices on the whole could be considered inclusive, but in some instances focussed more on difference and fell into the trap of othering Asian peoples and cultures. As expected, practices with literature differed across the year levels, with the focus changing from explicit to implicit attention to culture. But critical practice shouldn't be left for the older years, it is a practice that needs to span all years.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The call from researchers globally was to encourage teachers to be more critical in their use of multicultural literature in general and with Asian literature specifically. The literature argued that teachers need to shift their own thinking about what Asian cultures and

identities actually were and identify the following: that Asia and Australia had a history of a complex ‘hybrid, heterogenous’ interplay of social relations; that Asian peoples were a mainstay of Australian history and culture; that Asian representation in literature should be mainstream; and that when working with literature that featured Asia, Asian culture or Asian characters in any way, that teachers needed to take care and use a critical lens about how that representation positioned Asian peoples.

Our key findings in this research were:

1. Teacher had a fluid and flexible definition of Asian literature when addressing the curriculum priority
2. There were a diversity of approaches to teaching literature, but the primary pedagogy used was to focus on response to literature
3. There was evidence of some ‘tourist multiculturalism’, particularly with lower year levels
4. There was evidence of some (limited) critical engagement with literature, particularly with upper year levels

Drawing from both the literature and these findings, we identified two key recommendations for teachers. These are related to (1) literature selection; and (2) pedagogy.

To address the curriculum priority, teachers in our study chose a range of different kinds of literature with Asian characters and culture represented. Following ideas from Bullen and Lunt (2015) and Rodriguez and Kim (2018), our recommendation is that teachers are aware of some of the pitfalls of representation by selecting literature that is not marked with cultural bias or telling a single story, but reflecting complexities, for example, finding more complex stories of Asian immigration, rather than triumphant tales of integration, are needed for children to better understand the spectrum of immigrant experiences. Bullen and Lunt

(2015) offer teachers a set of eight criteria for selecting and using Asian literature in the classroom:

1. Assess, and demonstrate, how the conventions of children's literature and its genres – fiction, non-fiction, or autobiography – influence the presentation of informational content.
2. Identify, and invite students into discussion about, how narrative strategies in children's texts work to position the reader to accept particular ideological assumptions.
3. Conduct the research necessary to identify inaccurate representations of historical events and cultural (or subcultural) traditions and practices.
4. Ensure the narrative is appropriately contextualised in terms of the ways history and culture are portrayed, unexplained, or stereotyped.
5. Be prepared to fill in the 'gaps' such as those created by page breaks, visual or verbal elisions.
6. Access scholarly sources for teaching strategies and be sceptical of magnanimous reviews.
7. Use a range of texts to assess the authenticity of truth claims or, as Mendoza and Reese (2001, np) put it, 'seek out other titles to create a collection that provides an adequate window and an undistorted mirror' of Asia.
8. Read for overt – and covert – cultural biases, interests, and emphases in the verbal and visual texts: whether produced by cultural 'insiders' or 'outsiders', the use of binary oppositions,

stereotyping, and the compression of diverse cultures into a conglomerate identity such as ‘Asian’.

(Bullen & Lunt, 2015, p. 162)

A further aspect to this first recommendation is the importance of making all forms of Asian literature mainstream and ‘normal’. Weinmann (p. 194) argued that teachers need to: (1) integrate perspectives of Asian community into the classroom; (2) consider ‘Asia in Australian’s backyard’. In some instances, this was evident in our study, but it was not consistent across year levels. Furthermore, Weinmann suggested that teachers need ‘a stronger sense of identification with and belonging to the Asia-Pacific region’ (Weinmann, p. 188) to ensure their work in classrooms was more inclusive.

Our second recommendation is the importance of critical approaches to pedagogy with Asian literature. As Rodriguez and Kim (2018) argue,

An examination of Asian and Asian Australian literature in classrooms through critical perspectives can disrupt the monopoly of mainstream culture by portraying marginalized cultures and challenging texts through questions about who is represented, underrepresented, misrepresented, or invisible, as well as questions about how power is exercised.

(Rodriguez & Kim, 2018, p. 26)

From our study, the tendency to focus on response to literature, whilst valuable, highlighted that more critical engagement with literature is urgently needed. Leong and Woods (2017) argued for the need for teachers to develop a community of practice around multicultural literature built on ‘a culture of openness’ (p, 378), whereby teachers are able to

guide students to challenge identity politics and any notions of ‘otherness’ in literature. It may require significant work to shift attitudes, particularly in primarily monocultural sites such as Tasmania, but this work is critical if we are to genuinely address the cross-curriculum priority, and beyond that, engender authentic intercultural respect and understanding. In a world divided by identity politics, such work is urgently needed.

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