



Why is Asia important to New Zealand schools?

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In organising our latest Asia Aware Principals Forum in Wellington on 14 May, the process has highlighted for me yet again just how difficult it must be to be a school leader that has to weigh up the many external agendas that are being lobbied about for inclusion in the school curriculum.

School principals have to respond and reflect the needs of their immediate constituent communities and also to be mindful of the skills and knowledge that their students will require to cope with a future that will be very different from the one we as educators grew up in.

My six-year-old adopted Vietnamese son recently came home from school puzzled, "Mum," he asked, "Why does everyone at my school think that I am Chinese? I'm not Chinese, I'm Vietnamese." As a result I suggested his teacher put a world map up in the classroom to show where Joe comes from and where Vietnam is in relation to China and New Zealand.

The incident did make me later contemplate the enormous amount of work that still needs to be done in New Zealand to make our students more conscious of the Asian region and the implications of its growing clout on the world stage.

What then is the state of Asia awareness in our schools? Our 2007 Asia Knowledge Working Group report *Preparing for a Future with Asia* found there was "very little ongoing commitment to the study of Asia within most schools, that most New Zealanders only speak English, only a very small proportion speak any Asian languages and that only a small proportion of teachers have specialist knowledge or understanding about Asia. In addition, there is little commitment to Asia in teacher education".

Now two years later, the overall picture still looks bleak. The world is moving forward but I am not sure if our schools are.

To date, about 175 principals around New Zealand have already attended Asia Aware Principals' forums that have been held in New Plymouth, Tauranga, Christchurch, Dunedin and Auckland since April last year.

In them, we ask principals to assess if they are doing a good job to equip students with the knowledge and skills that they will need as global citizens, particularly in relation to Asia's growing influence on the world and on New Zealand.

Whilst many school principals have implemented many good initiatives such as, for example, creating a Chinese garden, having translators at parent interviews, connecting with local Asian communities, celebrating festival days, incorporating dance, art and music into assemblies, and displaying flags from Asian countries in the school hall, anything on a deeper level still needs to be addressed.

The revised curriculum has an exciting vision for young New Zealanders which, if implemented successfully in schools, will enable our young people to be confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners.

All of these are key competences required for our young people to successfully live and work in an increasingly multi-cultural society and to take up the growing opportunities that Asia will continue to present as the region becomes wealthier and more powerful.

In order to understand the urgency of raising Asia awareness in our schools, here are some indicators that already demonstrate how dependent we already are on the Asian region.

- Currently, ten of our top 20 export markets are in Asia. New Zealand has free trade agreements with China, Thailand, Singapore and ASEAN and is pursuing others with Malaysia and South Korea.
- Tourism from Asia is a significant driver for our economy. In the year to March, more than 400,000 visitors to New Zealand came from Asian countries.
- Our school system depends on students from Asia. In 2008, there were over 8,000 international students from Asian countries enrolled in our schools.
- The majority of foreign fee-paying students in our schools come from Asia. In 2008, that figure was 86 percent, of which 45 percent come from South

Korea, 12 percent come from Japan and nearly 14 percent came from China.

- Asians make up about ten percent of our population and this proportion is reflected in the increasing ethnic diversity in our schools.
- Asia is the region that has been identified by government, academics, policy makers and business leaders as the single most important region to our future prosperity.

One key aspect of the principals' forums is to ask principals to identify barriers to New Zealand schools becoming more Asia aware. Competing demands, lack of confidence, skills and ability to do a good job, shortage of resources and funding, a focus on literacy and numeracy and apathy were amongst the reason given for not doing more. The list is long but it is evident that solutions need to be found.

The challenge for schools is how to include Asia so that deeper learning takes place but without displacing existing core content. This is why while studies of Asia and the teaching of Asian languages are an important aspect of increasing students' knowledge about the region, an easier and more accessible strategy could be the inclusion of Asia content across the wider curriculum.

One young teacher that I know, for example, converses in Japanese for ten minutes every day to her intermediate level students, which is not part of a Japanese lesson. While few New Zealand teachers are fluent in Japanese, many more would be able to easily incorporate examples taken from Asia to include in their lessons on science, history, geography, the arts and other subjects.

So, back to my first question on what is the state of Asia awareness in schools? Whilst some schools have embarked on the journey of embedding Asia content in their schools, and others are dabbling with it, mainly through the presence of Asian fee paying students, many others are yet to take up the challenge.

By 2025, over 20 percent of New Zealanders will be of Asian ethnic origin and the world will see the entrenchment of China and India as Asian world powers alongside Japan. In our lifetimes we will see a huge shift in wealth and influence from the West to the East but will our young New Zealanders be ready for it?