RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Australia's Engagement with Asia in the National Curriculum

Abstract   The 2014 national curriculum of Australia is a significant initiative that the Australian government has taken in proposing a curriculum that stresses Australia's engagement with Asia. In practice, this means that Asian cultures, beliefs, environments and the connections between Australia and Asia are embedded in the learning processes of Australian schools. This article provides an analysis of Australia's engagement with Asia, which is a cross-curriculum priority in the Australian curriculum. In particular, using the example of China, the article examines the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis involved in Australia's engagement with Asia from an educational perspective, especially during the global pandemic with the spread of COVID-19 affecting the world so significantly. The intent of this analysis is to map out the educational factors involved and consider what might happen to Australian students and schools as a result of their engagement with the educational cultures, beliefs and practices of China. This is connected to the two countries' economic engagements and people-to-people ties. By considering some of the current discourses that shape the Australia-China relationships, possibilities are opening up to rethink educational positions.

Keywords   Asian culture, Australian curriculum, global education, international approach, policy analysis

Introduction

The introduction of an Australian curriculum is likely to have a widespread and

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long term impact on schools, teachers and students, and yet there has been a swift and an almost unquestioning acceptance of its introduction by the Australian public and by educators (Ditchburn, 2012, p. 259).

It is the purpose of this article to follow up on Ditchburn's earlier argument about the unquestioning acceptance of the Australian curriculum by Australian schools. In order to explore this problem and elaborate upon its nuances, I have selected, in the Australian curriculum, cross-curriculum priorities, taking *engagement with Asia* as an example. By locating the idea of engagement with Asia within the Australian educational context and more importantly within the context of Asia, the paper offers an analysis of this cross-curriculum priority. It attempts to raise questions about the values and consequences of engagement with Asia in Australian schools, with the intent of identifying possibilities for thinking about and working with this cross-curriculum priority in critical and effective ways.

Using China as an example, the article is concerned with the underpinning beliefs and practices of education in Australia and China. It aims to show how educational philosophies, teaching pedagogies, and teaching and learning contexts influence teaching and students' learning in each context. This paper is not a curriculum study per se but instead focuses on a discussion of general educational situations in the two countries and how they could contribute to intentions played out in the curriculum of Australia's engagement with Asia.

Engagement with Asia through Education: The Australian Context

In the Australian curriculum, students' engagement with Asia is a cross-curriculum priority. By *cross-curriculum priority*, we refer to an important aspect that needs to be addressed in students' learning areas (ACARA, 2014). The national curriculum states:

> The Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia priority provides a regional context for learning in all areas of the curriculum. It reflects Australia's extensive engagement with Asia in social, cultural, political and economic spheres.

…

An understanding of Asia underpins the capacity of Australian students to
be active and informed citizens working together to build harmonious local,
regional and global communities, and build Australia's social, intellectual
and creative capital. (ACARA, 2014)

Central to this view are two beliefs: Engagement with Asia is important for
Australian education; engagement with Asia benefits the country and Australian
students.

Although engagement with Asia in Australian schools was officially
introduced in 2014, the roots of this introduction can be traced back to the 1980s
and the work of various political parties. In 1989, Robert Hawke, then Prime
Minster of Australia, established the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation in order
to build closer economic ties between Australia and Asia. When Paul Keating
took over the government in 1991, he strengthened this initiative by reviewing
Australia's foreign policies with Asia. The Keating Government gave an explicit
message that it was for Australia's own political, economic, and cultural benefits
for Australian values and identity to shift closer to Asia (Johnson, 2018). This
political intention resulted in some prominent actions, including the
establishment of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools,
the foundation of the Asia-Australia Relations Institute and an increase in the
number of Asian immigrants to Australia. In 2007, when Kevin Rudd was elected
Prime Minster, even stronger attempts to work with Asia were made. Through
introducing new national security policies, the Rudd Government tried to deal
with transnational issues affecting the Asia-Pacific region and in doing so, Rudd
aimed to strength regional security cooperation and diplomatic ties with Asia
(Dodd, 2008). In a public speech, Rudd stated that engagement with Asia was a
matter of "engaging with a region of global significance in its own right" (as
cited in He, 2011, p. 270).

While there is a difference of approaches among the politicians, all
demonstrated a clear commitment to working with Asia. Although these are the
people commonly cited to account for Australia's relationship with Asia, it was
Prime Minister Julia Gillard who crystalized Australia's engagement with Asia in
the educational landscape through the introduction of the Government's Asian

Century White Paper in 2012. The paper stated that "every Australian student will have significant exposure to studies of Asia across the curriculum to increase their cultural knowledge and skills and enable them to be active in the region" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. 15).

Accompanying the beginning of Abbott's Government in 2013, Australia's connection with Asia became stronger and important, the principle that Australia formed strong relationships with all the major powers emerged (Bisley, 2018). Apart from the USA, all the major powers were from Asia, including China, Japan, and India. For China in particular, Prime Minister Tony Abbott made a very clear statement during his visit to Beijing in 2014 that Australia is not in China to do a deal, but to be a friend (Murphy & Kaiman, 2014). Within the educational context, the government's intention to be close to Asia was evident in the way in which the Abbott Government implemented the New Colombo Plan as an initiative of public diplomacy. Under this plan, Australian students were supported to study in the Indo-Pacific region as a way to learn from and continue to strengthen intercultural understandings and ties (Australian Government: DFAT, 2020). At the start of the plan, Australian students from 24 universities were funded for their periodical studies in Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore, and later on these host locations were expanded to encompass other countries including China.

That "the relationship with China is far too important to put at risk by failing to clearly set the terms of healthy and sustainable engagement" was a remarkable point made by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in 2017 (Medcalf, 2019, p. 117). The point was made during a period in which Australia-China relations entered a difficult phase in the midst of Turnbull's period in government. The attempt to protect Australia's national interests and democratic values created a demand for considerations of how Australians could get away from the influence of China in ways that were consistent with China's preferences. This was "because its (Australia's) economy, especially trade in iron ore, tourism and education, is so exposed to China" (Medcalf, 2019, p. 111). According to Medcalf (2019), "Between 2016 and 2018, Australia's perceptions of China underwent a significant reality check" (p. 119). During his term of service, Turnbull tried hard to develop a counter-foreign-interference strategy while he also kept a positive attitude towards his country's relationship with China.

Creating "a new normal relations with China, in which economic opportunity is balanced with a heightened awareness of risk" was a significant task (p. 109).

The Morrison Government that came in power in 2018 inherited a legacy of Australia-Asia relationship from the Turnbull government that confirmed Australia's commitment to deepening strategic partnerships. His policies were built around reconstructing the image of Australia in the international community and recreating their trust in Australia (Rimmer, 2019). This was due, in part, to the international community's loss of patience with Australia's frequent change of leadership. In his term so far, a significant action that Morrison has taken in regard to projecting Australia's role in the international community is the stepping-up of engagement with the Pacific. According to Rimmer (2019), this action that purported to further enhance Australia's commitment to the Pacific communities had the tacit aim of reducing China's increasing influence in the region.

Global Education

A major push for engagement with Asia through education lies at the economic change. The change depends hugely on globalization, a shift from local to global production, a focus on global citizenship and a large expansion in educational import and export (Paris & Biggs, 2018). Globalization as a living framework has significantly influenced education. Fundamental to this is the consideration of skills, capabilities, and competencies that new generations of Australian need to tackle the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing them in a rapidly changing and complex world (Power, 2006).

Australian schools have been affected by the aspiration of global education. On the positive side, such an aspiration re-emphasizes the long-standing importance of schools in Australian society. In connection with the example of Australian engagement with Asia in education, Halse (2015) explained this as underpinned by the reason to "look at schools as key sites for developing 'Asia literate' and 'globally competent' citizens who have the capacities and capabilities to live, work and interact in and with the peoples, cultures and societies of Asia" (p. 1).

On the other side and from a less positive perspective, positioning schools as

key sites for global education raises issues related to the role of education and probably a narrow notion of its values. According to Moss (2008),

> Education is widely proposed as a necessary response to globalization. But such advocacy often treats education in a narrow and strongly instrumental way: as a means of adapting populations to the demands of an increasingly competitive global economy through the ''measurable technical production of human capital.'' (p. 115)

A simple reason why education is a passive participant in globalization is that educational change is usually imposed from the top down by policy makers and governing bodies. There is a significant absence of an educational voice in global education (Reid, 2020). In his account of educational changes in Australia, Reid (2020) claimed that Australian schools need to authorize their own autonomy and operate in ways that balance community values, learners' needs and global demands through thinking critically about the nature, role and purpose of education that could suit Australia.

Australian Education

Early immigrant Australians were mainly British descendants. "Australian's early nationhood was a cultural transplant of the British Isles and many aspects of Australian life were modelled on English examples" (James & Beckett, 2000, p. 175). As a result, Australian educational tradition was largely a British import, characterized by complex and diverse patterns of learning and teaching, due to the uneven distribution of population and wealth over the course of British history (Sidhu & Dall'Alba, 2017).

Australia is also for the most part a settler society. In recent years particularly, the country has undergone a significant racial and cultural restructuring. Recent statistics shows that 29.7% of Australian residents are net overseas migrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Diverse populations further diversify Australian education. This is especially so after the 1980s with the commencement of globalization. Australians, through recognition of and reflection on differences among races and cultures, started to problematize what

education meant for them (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012). While British ideas still dominated in some schools, there was no single philosophy or approach that was universally embraced by Australian educators. The commitment to diversity meant that Australian schools adopted their own ways of learning and teaching in order to meet distinctive contextual needs.

Decentralized education has been a strong role in the Australian education system. Schools are managed by individual states and local governments. The introduction of a National Foundation to Year 10 Curriculum in 2014 was a huge breakthrough in the Australian educational history. With that, consistent national standards are set in order to improve learning outcomes for all young Australians (ACARA, 2014).

In general, the aspiration of learning in Australian schools is the development of students' identity and disposition, and the promotion of learning engagement. It is expected that students build a sense of ownership of learning and are actively engaged in the experience of education (Crick & Goldspink, 2014). As stated in the National Curriculum, two goals drive the Australian education: equity and excellence; all young Australians should become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (ACARA, 2014).

Despite this aspiration, the legitimacy of learners as agents of learning is hard to implement because the Australian educational structures have by and large been "unresponsive, irrelevant and inflexible" (Luke et al. as cited in Tadich et al., 2007, p. 258). According to Tadich et al. (2007), Australian education is a site of struggle, actively mobilizing new initiatives, but at the same time, resisting the amendment of traditions, for example not wanting to change the standard-based national testing regimes. Perry and Southwell (2014) described Australian education as marked by "high levels of choice… and competition" (p. 467). The ideal of learner-centered pedagogy is further challenged by an international comparative study of student achievement in which Australian students were outperformed in academic results (Thompson et al., 2016).

Asian Education: The Chinese Example

Confucianism is one of the most important philosophical influences on Chinese

education (Tan, 2021). Not only China, many other East Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore also claim a Confucian heritage. Among all the Confucian ideas, the push for academic excellence (that led to officialdom in ancient China) has driven Chinese students, parents, and schools towards excellence in academic studies. One of the most influential ideas from Confucius is the concept of *Xue er you ze shi* (学而优则仕), meaning that officialdom is the natural outlet for scholarly achievers. The status of officials is defined as the top in the social hierarchy in traditional Chinese culture and society. In the phase of *Xue er you ze shi*, scholarly achievement is conceived of as the most effective means to establish one's status in society. The well-known civil service examination which spanned 1,300 years in China has hugely shaped Chinese education in a way that competition and scholarly achievement are important (Guo, 2013).

Chinese pedagogy takes a knowledge-building form and teaching is typically carried out via the transmitting approach (Liu et al., 2015). Teachers and parents endeavor to enable students' academic success by passing on knowledge through systematic and logical instruction, and rigorous testing.

Unlike Australia, education in China is centralized. Ever since 1949, the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese central government was fully committed to the management and facilitation of educational operations in the compulsory school sector (OECD, 2016). The school curriculum followed a one-size-fits-all model.

Particular efforts for curriculum reforms were made between 1999 and 2009 as a result of China's endeavor to meet the challenge of global competition. Learning in an all-round way was emphasized (Yan, 2014). New curriculum guidelines were issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2003. This aimed to transform an examination-based education system into a quality-oriented one. By 2009, all provinces in China had implemented the new curriculum guidelines (OECD, 2016).

In the efflorescence of curriculum reforms during the past years in China, perhaps a salient common denominator is the recognition that "the overall level of success of the reform has been far from satisfying… Teacher centered didactic teaching remains prevalent in classrooms" (Yan, 2014, p. 6). Thus, despite an aspiration for quality education towards students' overall development, teachers

are reluctant to give up the traditional approach. There are other factors that temper the new curriculum, with the most noticeable one being parents' expectations for high test scores (Sheng, 2014).

Shanghai students' achievements in international educational comparisons have created a subject of educational interests. For example, Nicolas Gibb, a Minister of State for Schools in the United Kingdom, called on all UK schools to learn from China (Zhang & Wang, 2014). Many Western educators believe that Chinese attitudes towards education are the most important factor in their students' success. What they might not know, however, was that in past decades, there were numerous innovative educators in China who have made serious attempts to shape their pedagogy in a Western way (Rao & Chan, 2009).

Obviously, if one central tension in students' learning in China is between a full commitment to academic success and the quality learning experiences of students, then another occurs as a result of the influence of Western pedagogy which inspires as well as puzzles Chinese teachers. Tan (2016) pointed out that "China is facing challenges in terms of the interactions and conflicts between foreign and local ideologies and practices" (p. 195). This raises important questions to Australian educators: Should the Chinese educational cultures and practices be something to learn from because they are themselves undergoing a serious review? Given that Chinese students' success is partly attributed to their learning from the West, what should Australians learn about the Chinese education?

In addition, given the COVID-19 crisis and the strained Australia-China relationship, there should also be renewed understandings about educational engagement between Australia and Asia. As indicated in a recent report from the Australia-China Relations Institute, important discussions need to be made about "whether Australia is too dependent on China" (Laurenceson & Zhou, 2020, p. 4). This has implications for curriculum practices in Australian schools. Some established strategies are subject to scrutiny in an attempt to build an effective educational engagement between the two countries.

SWOT Analysis

This paper uses a SWOT analysis to explore the impact of Australia's

engagement with Asia on Australian schools and students from an educational perspective.

SWOT analysis is typically defined as conscious strategies for measuring the match between internal and external situations (Zarb, 2015). For the question of this study, I will consider the strengths and weaknesses of Australian's engagement with Asia through education, point out opportunities for Australian students and schools and identify threats to them. Educational philosophy, teaching pedagogy, and learning and the teaching contexts of Australia and China are the lenses through which the analysis is conducted. The study will also draw on recent contexts and shed light on how the strained relationship between Australia and China might influence Australian engagement with Asia through education.

The model presented in Figure 1 shows the four lenses that guide my analysis of this study:
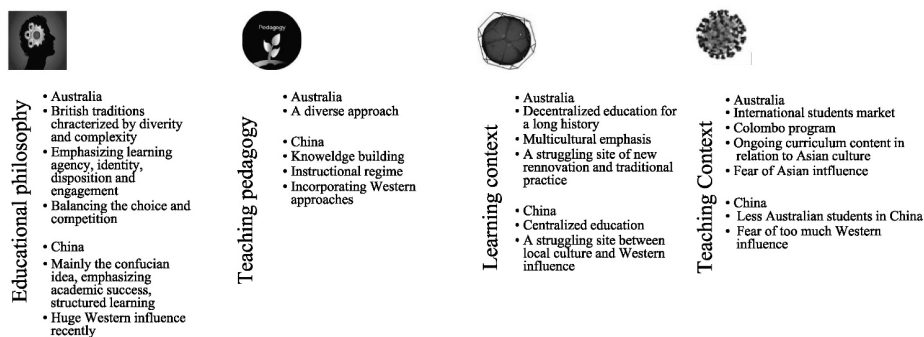

Figure 1   Educational Analysis of Australia's Engagement with Asia

Strengths, Opportunities, Threats and Weaknesses: What Engagement with Asia/China Offers Australian Schools?

Both Australia and China are in the midst of a shift in philosophy, pedagogy, and educational context from a national approach to a more internationalized way of learning and teaching. This call for change in education stems largely from the rise of global education in both countries (Paris & Biggs, 2018). Behind the cross-curriculum priority of the Australian curriculum is the intention of the governments, policy makers, and educators to learn from Asia. Nonetheless,

despite the historical closeness, the current strained relationship between Australian and China has given rise to concerns about how to maintain educational engagements between the two countries.

Here is an overall consensus in Australia that Asian students are highly welcomed (Song & McCarthy, 2019). Contributions that Asian students have made to the Australian economy are very significant. In 2019, Chinese international students alone generated 12 billion Australian dollars (Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2020). Keeping Australia as a popular educational destination for Asian students has been a legitimate focus of successive Australian governments. Therefore, unless Asian students make other choices, they will remain important to Australian residents. For a country such as Australia that values the Asian contribution to its economy and wishes to ensure that Asian students are welcomed residents, there are sound reasons for it to keep the educational engagements with Asia. It can be thus argued that despite the rocky political relationships between Australia and China, curriculum policy regarding the educational engagement with Asia will not be much affected in Australia.

It is believed that the benefits of educational engagements between Australia and China are mutual, with China also getting the educational services it needs. The Australian approach to teaching and curriculum reforms has been advocated strongly in China and promoted in many areas of research (e.g., Gan & He, 2020; Li, 2020; Liu, 2020).

For these reasons and within the context of the countries' engagements in education, a crucial question is how to implement it in practice so that Australian and Chinese students all benefit (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012). While it is necessary that Australian students are equipped with Asian knowledge and understanding, it is equally important that such knowledge and understanding does not pose unnecessary risks to Australian education.

With diverse educational philosophies and diverse pedagogical approaches that direct Australian education, and students' agency, identity and learning dispositions as desirable learning outcomes, it is vital to look beyond results to the quality of student experiences in Australia. Do students get quality learning experiences if they develop knowledge and understanding of Asian educational cultures, beliefs and practices?

To explore new opportunities that arise in relation to Australia's engagement with Asia, background information of Australia and Asia was examined through a review of relevant literature addressing points about the education of the two countries. One strength of the initiative of engagement with Asia is that diversity of Australian education is further diversified. The engagement with Asia can enrich teaching and learning in Australian schools. Further diversified learning approaches, in particular logic of thinking and the instructional regime, may benefit some Australian students, given that students vary in learning styles and preferences (Tran et al., 2016).

Despite the open approach to teaching, the heavy content load of students' learning still characterizes Australian school education (Dandy et al., 2015). Among all the capabilities recognized as important for students' learning in the Australian curriculum are knowledge and skills (ACARA, 2014). As shown in the curriculum, while Australian students are expected to develop agency and independence, they also experience standardized approaches to learning. A systematic way of learning and teaching may be useful to student's development of skills and knowledge in the face of a heavy content load. In fact, globalization presents the need for skilled and knowledgeable global citizens. Rieckmann (2018), for example, argued that knowledge, capacities, and skills enable individuals to successfully participate in global society.

There is no doubt that the success of Asian students in international tests has put Asian strategies on the reform agenda in Australian schools. It seems timely to get to know Asian education and examine Asian strategies. The engagement with Asia enables Australian students to learn about Asian beliefs and practices.

A conclusive argument about the strengths and values of engagement with Asia through education is that in this interconnected world, schools can no longer operate independently from their global contexts and they can definitely benefit from learning a different set of educational philosophies, pedagogies and learning strategies (Horsley & Bauer, 2010). In this increasingly globalized context, it is important that Australian students are equipped with necessary skills and knowledge about Asia, as this will help expand their life opportunities. A lack of exposure to cultural and racial differences on the other hand could lead to difficult intercultural relationships (Hong & Cheon, 2017).

As discussed above, the interest of Australian's engagement with Asia through

curriculum has, in part, been influenced by the realization that Australian students develop knowledge and understanding of Asian cultures and beliefs (ACARA, 2014). However, discourses and theories of Australian education are embedded in notions of agency, engagement and independence (Crick & Goldspink, 2014). Discussion about learning from Asia, therefore, raises questions about how the Asian educational cultures and practices could support Australian students' development of agency and independence and what conditions might enable this.

At the heart of educational engagement between Australia and Asia, I would argue, is the reconstruction of learning and teaching in Australian schools in light of the knowledge and desires of learners and teachers. An important question is the extent to which Asian styles of learning are understood as well as preferred by Australian learners and teachers and how they could assist with Australians' aspirations for agency and independence. If Asian education is not understood in Australian schools, or if it is not preferred by Australian teachers and students, engagement with Asia may generate conflicts to them. The outcome will not be positive if the policy is blindly or reluctantly adopted (Reid, 2020).

In the opposition position, there may be teachers who are committed to an engagement with Asia and prefer the incorporation of Asian practice in their classes. Even with this positive attitude, teachers need support to identify what in Asian education can be included in Australian schools in order to benefit Australian students' learning and their development of agency and autonomy. With a heavy workload themselves, taking on different pedagogies is challenging. Teachers need time and space for innovations (Holdsworth & Maynes, 2018). This could present a threat to school budgets.

There is also useful insight from other research into the reasons why Asia-related knowledge and learning are not easily absorbed in Australian schools. In Henderson's (2018) study where she examined the nature of Australian teachers' work, Asian knowledge was perceived as having little transfer value to Australian schools because "many teachers see themselves as unprepared to teach the Asia priority and Asia-related studies, as they lack specialist disciplinary knowledge" (p. 129). It is problematic when such an attitude is accompanied by teachers' limited ability to understand the differences. This will potentially make the engagement with Asia only a superficial act but

not a process of making and changing (Soong, 2018).

In addition, past studies indicate that Asia, in particular China, shares the same experience with Australia, struggling with school renovations in an attempt to incorporate global ideas (Tan, 2016). The catalogue of complaints against it is that (1) The Chinese way of education is not student-centered, providing useless learning that aims to cover the mandated textbooks; (2) it is not related to daily social and economic life, ignoring students' life situations; (3) the prevalent examination dynamic generates undesirable effects (Liu & Lu, 2012; Yan, 2014). Overall, Chinese education is perceived as being unable to serve the needs of students, giving too much academic stress to students, parents and teachers, and providing some unnecessary learning and teaching experiences. Yin et al. (2014) examined the struggles and difficulties of Chinese education and concluded that "three conflicting cultural values, namely compliance culture, examination culture and the new pedagogic culture" have given rise to the issues and problems in contemporary Chinese education (p. 293).

It seems reasonable that engagement with Asia should be made strategically and thoughtfully in a way that Asian countries actively work with Australia in search for the most appropriate and balanced integration that benefits both sides. Moss (2007) offered four ideas for effective educational engagement: (1) decision making together about the purposes, practices and environment of the engagement; (2) evaluation of the current work of both parties; (3) contesting dominant educational discourses and traditions; and (4) "opening up for change, through envisioning utopias and turning them into utopian action" (p. 13). In addition, it should not be the policymakers but rather the teachers, schools, parents and students who are making decisions about educational engagements (Casto et al., 2016). It is crucial that their needs and interests are identified. When learners, parents, and teachers are all committed and motivated, not only is the engagement process smoother but they are in a stronger position to learn and incorporate change.

Moreover, a healthy engagement in education between Australia and Asia should be done in a way that it is not necessarily as quick as desired but instead a broadening of the philosophical and pedagogical bases of school education. According to Phelan (2001) "wider discourses do not force us to act in any manner; in fact, understanding the nature of our discourse… may gain us a space

to alter thought and practice" (p. 585). Using Phelan's point, it could be said that if engagement with Asia means to widen Australian educational discourses, it should not be compulsory but a possibility or a choice that schools, teachers and learners make.

Conclusion

This article has considered the cross-curriculum priority of engagement with Asia in the Australian curriculum and inquired into understandings of the impact of this on Australian schools, thereby constructing possible strategies. At the center of the argument was the idea that Australian schools needed to be aware of their own educational beliefs and cultures and those of Asia. While it cannot be claimed that education could on its own afford a sustained practice of engagement within the current context of strained political relationships between Australia and China, the paper takes the point that engagement with Asia in education is likely to continue in Australia. There are clear economic reasons for this. Even so, I would like to draw attention to the point that education should be an autonomous community acting for the benefit of new generations. On the basis of the SWOT analysis, the study proposes that Australia and Asia make strategic and thoughtful engagements that focus on an appropriate and a balanced integration that benefits both sides. These engagements should include a careful consideration of the structural and culturally rooted philosophies and ideas of the two countries. The engagement with Asia through the curriculum should be made by choice and not by force. This is not an argument for limiting educational opportunity. It is, instead, an analysis of the needs and interests of teachers and learners and a consideration of whether they can truly benefit from these experiences and how Australian schools might engage in a rational and meaningful pattern of relationships with Asia.

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