Asian perspectives and intercultural understanding

Recent educational policy emphases on intercultural understanding are consistent with recognition of Australia's culturally diverse society and its geographic location in the Asian region. The Federal Government policy on multiculturalism has been guided by need for harmony and cooperation in an increasingly cosmopolitan and culturally pluralistic society. Operating within the theme, "unity within diversity", Government policy advocates a multicultural and cohesive nation with equal rights and opportunity for all regardless of their ethnic origin (Ho, Niles, Penney & Thomas, 1994).

Australia's geographic location and growing economic, social, and political links with Asian nations require educational policies and practices that facilitate students' better understandings of Asian cultures and communities. In 1988, an Asian Studies Council paper, A National Strategy for the Study of Asia in Australia (1988), identified widespread ignorance of Asia in the Australian community and proposed that by the year 2000 students' knowledge of Asian communities, achievements, politics, and economies should enable understandings of Asia that would foster social, intellectual and working contacts. It was proposed that this would be achieved through inclusion of studies on Asia across the curriculum and the Australian contextualisation of Asian studies (Asian Studies Council, 1988, pp. 4-5).

Later reports, including Australia and the North East Asian Ascendancy (Garnaut, 1989) and Australia's Languages: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (1991) have reiterated the need for Australian schools to develop approaches to curriculum that counter popularist and stereotypic notions of Asian cultures. These new foci on Asia are part of a wider movement to promote intercultural understandings in Australian schools and communities. The Commonwealth Government's National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia (1989) expressed the need to promote respect for individual identity "to ensure social cohesion and to enhance social justice" (p. v). Such broad statements have provided the background for more specific policy statements on global curriculum and intercultural understanding in educational contexts. Most recently, for example, The Review of the Post-Compulsory Education Committee (the Finn Report, 1991), indicated the importance of developing "cultural understanding" and pointed to three sub-competencies under this heading.

*Understanding and knowledge of Australia's historical, geographical and political context;
* Understanding of major global issues eg. competing environment, technological and social priorities; and
*Understanding of the world of work, its importance and requirements

(Finn, 1991, p. 58).

In Western Australia, the Social Justice in Education (1991) policy emphasised that educational provision should reflect the diversity and needs of social and cultural groups and promote understanding and respect for cultural complexity, diversity and difference. According to Camilleri (1992, p. 142), it is this focus on initiatives to construct "process(es) of articulation between incumbents of different cultures" that distinguishes "intercultural" from "multicultural" understanding.

Importantly, in an increasingly global environment, education must empower students to "cope with the irrevocable interdependence of humankind- socially, politically, economically, ecologically, and on

the grounds of human survival (Bikson & Law, 1994, p. 52). Promotion of "globalism" - the interdependence and internationalisation of economic activity requires awareness of the both the diversity and interconnectedness of cultures and societies. Clearly, given our geographic location, a focus on Asian cultures is an important component in any efforts to promote intercultural understanding.

The National Strategy for the Study of Asia in Australia (1988), proposed that Australian students should learn about Asian cultural, political and economic contexts. It was envisaged that students would draw on cultural achievements of Asian civilisations for their personal enrichment and on political, social and economic knowledge for future use as informed citizens of the Asian region. It was hoped that studies of Asia would afford Australians a greater comprehension of the diversity and complexity of the peoples, cultures and environments that made up Asia.

To date, implementation of policy initiatives about Asia has occurred in several ways, including through central and local school policies and through initiatives of the Asia Education Foundation (AEF). Established to work with schools, education authorities, teacher education institutions, professional associations, philanthropic foundations and the corporate sector to promote and support studies of Asia across all curriculum areas, the AEF is a joint venture of the Curriculum Corporation and the University of Melbourne and managed through the University's Asia Link Centre. The work of the AEF is substantially funded by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), but has also attracted additional support and resources through its Partnerships program.

The AEF aims to facilitate the study of Asia across the curriculum in Australian schools, to develop and disseminate Asia-related curriculum support materials, and to promote the study of Asia in teacher education. It aims to be responsive and sensitive to the needs of teachers in their attempts to include studies of Asia in their

curricula. As part of its goal implementation process, some 80 schools across Australia were initially designated Magnet Schools. Magnet Schools pursue a range of programs across the curriculum focussing on awareness and understanding of Asia and Asian cultural communities.

In this paper we consider the responses of 639 (senior primary and junior secondary) students enrolled in 16 of these Magnet Schools (two in each state and territory) to questions about aspects of Asia. We discuss the development of intercultural awareness and explore qualitative differences in students' levels of intercultural understanding. In the longer term, a major purpose of this preliminary work is to construct and refine an approach to measuring intercultural understanding in school contexts.

The work forms, in part, a component of a larger project designed to evaluate AEF programs, including Magnet Schools. The paper draws implications for curriculum and for teaching and learning about Asia in Australian schools.

Intercultural understanding

Human societies are notable for the cultural legacy of values and skills which their members acquire. Institutions of culture include bureaucratic organisations such as schools, economic and political systems, and informal systems of practices and mores. These institutions channel attitudes and prescriptions for skilled performance in particular directions. Each generation in any society

inherits a cultural history, including technologies, to support problem-solving. At the same time, children are active in organising their thinking and constructing meaning from the world around them. This integration of individual and social activity, in turn, constitutes and transforms cultural practices with each successive generation (Rogoff, 1990).

Intercultural understanding is a multi-dimensional construct containing elements that are cognitive, affective and behavioural. In this paper intercultural understanding refers to awareness and appreciation of the diversity and interdependence of ideas and practices in human societies (Christensen, 1989; Finn, 1991). Its operational manifestation, intercultural competence, takes the idea of awareness to action. This step requires a wide knowledge base plus openness and adaptability to different cultural perspectives and the willingness to learn whatever is needed to deploy domain skills effectively in new contexts, including perhaps functionality in another language (Bikson & Law, 1994, p. 26).

In this paper, we are concerned only with the awareness and appreciation component of intercultural understanding.

Coming to terms with one's own culture is a complex and lengthy process. Understanding the culture of people in other societies or communities involves even more complex cognitive, affective and behavioural processes. According to Christensen (1989), the process of becoming aware of social positions in relation to others happens as a gradual part of psychosocial development. She contends that intercultural awareness begins to develop at the point when interactions with other cultures are initiated. But, it is unlikely that development is completed before adulthood, if ever. An understanding of other cultures is based on comprehension of complex processes. The notion of "understanding" depends on the links made by the individual between new information and previous knowledge and experience. Further, it is firmly anchored in self-awareness and acceptance. "Even older adolescents are commonly struggling to define and accept who they are in terms of cultural backgrounds, ideals, attitudes, moral codes, and interpersonal relations" (Christensen, 1989, p. 272). Indeed, Christensen (1989) contends it is possible that some people will never develop an awareness and understanding of other cultures, because of lack of opportunity or interest or because of an aversion to interacting with people who are culturally or racially different.

There are several important dimensions of intercultural understanding. They include:

*a wide knowledge base emphasising factual coexistence of diverse cultures and subcultures;

*understanding of shared cultural elements;

*recognition and appreciation of different cultural perspectives and cultural diversity; and

*recognition of interconnectedness and interdependence humankind-socially, politically, economically, and ecologically- and the need to promote effective coexistence between groups (Bikson & Law, 1994; Camilleri, 1992; Christensen, 1989; Schuster, 1989).

Hanvey (1981) has identified four stages in the development of

 intercultural awareness.

Level 1:An awareness of very visible cultural traits that are interpreted as exotic or bizarre.

Level 2: An awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own and are experienced as frustrating or

irrational.

Level 3: An awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that
contrast markedly with one's own but can be understood cognitively.

Level 4: An awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint
of the insider.

Like Christensen (1989), Willinski (1992) believes that development of
intercultural understanding, depends on experiences with existing
cultural resources. It grows out of "receptivity and curiosity" within
prevailing cultural forms. And, it is concerned with the ability to
communicate, collaborate, and work interculturally. As Bikson & Law
(1994) contend, it is an experience, not just a content issue, a view
supported by Sadow (1987) and others (e.g., Camilleri, 1992).

According to Willinsky (1992), development of intercultural understand
begins when students see that culture is not single-minded or static in
its perspective and focus. They must appreciate that there are no easy
characterisations of historical events, peoples, or cultures. They need
to reserve judgement in favour of gaining insights and finding a basis
for engagement and interaction. And, they need to see that there is
always room for contesting the meaning of events and texts.
Intercultural understanding involves thinking about what constitutes
one's own cultural landscape, as well as a more regional or global
perspective.

For Willinsky, moving beyond community and nation to a more global
cultural perspective is particularly challenging because of the legacy
of conflict that has affected peoples and cultures. But, rather than
effecting "historical amnesia" he suggests turning the legacy of
conflict to understand negotiation processes and new instances of
co-operation, partnership and appreciation.

Willinsky's work on promoting intercultural understanding focuses
mainly on the Pacific region. However, his emphasis on the increasing
interdependence of economies and cultures throughout the region to
prepare students for participation in these developments is consistent
with the wider construct and promotion of intercultural understanding
and, in particular, globalisation.

In Australian schools, the broad notion of intercultural understanding
is not new. For some years now it has been has been promoted, both
formally and informally, to various extents in guises such as
"multicultural education" or "social justice education". It confronts
issues related to "plurality" of elements and situations of diverse
cultural communities and communication between cultural groups.
However, despite an interest in helping students' better understand and
communicate with cultures other than their own and a wider movement to
globalisation of curricula, there is little information on how

intercultural understanding develops in childhood and adolescence (Christensen, 1989; Hollinsworth, 1992).

The purpose of the research reported in this paper was to explore students' knowledge of Asia and Asian cultures and to document

development of intercultural understanding. Knowledge of a culture is considered important in the development of intercultural understanding. The developmental nature of intercultural understanding has been flagged in the literature (e.g., Hanvey, 1981; Christensen, 1989) but not explored in any depth.

In this study, categories of intercultural understanding were generated using a phenomenographic approach. Student responses to open-ended question probing intercultural understanding were used as the basis for category description. The categories were constituted in relation to the characteristics of the data and to theoretical perspectives of intercultural understanding, especially those of Hanvey (1981) and Christensen (1989).

Method

Separate questionnaires were administered to 316 senior primary (mean age 10.4 years, SD 1.4) and 323 junior secondary students (mean age 14.6 years, SD 1.3). Most students were born in Australia (84% primary and 88% secondary) with 7% primary and 6% secondary born in Asia. Most students (88% primary and 89% secondary) spoke English as a first language at home. Students attended one of 16 schools designated as Magnet Schools. These schools, from each State/Territory, were selected randomly from the 80 Magnet Schools throughout the country. Selection of students was made by the school and based, mainly, on timetable convenience.

A 13 item questionnaire (with sub items) was developed to seek information on a range of issues about Asian countries and peoples. Questions, both open-ended and closed, probed students' knowledge of geographical, historical, cultural, socio-economic and political factors that parallel those in Willinsky's (1992) work on intercultural understanding in the Pacific region. Three questions relating to an imaginary pen-friend in an Asian country were specifically designed to elicit responses that would provide insights into intercultural understanding.

The questionnaire was administered on a whole class basis and took between 30 and 40 minutes to complete.

A phenomenographic approach was taken to analyse student responses to the open-ended questions. The first stage in this analysis was to identify categories of description from responses to questions that

probed intercultural understanding. The categories reflected characteristics of the data and theoretical perspectives of intercultural understanding. Three researchers were involved in the process of reaching agreement on shared meanings.

Results and Discussion

Overview of students' knowledge of Asia
Information on students' knowledge of socio-economic aspects of Asia and how they learned about Asia is reported below. Findings indicate that students seem, in general, to be developing a sound knowledge base on which to build intercultural understanding.

With recent Government emphasis on the importance of Asia to Australia and concomitant support for curriculum programs promoting a knowledge of Asian countries, people and languages, we sought first to identify what students perceived as the important factors linking Australia and Asian region. Primary students were asked to give one reason why Asia is important to Australia. Secondary students were asked to list "the

most important things linking Australia to Asia". Table 1 summarises student responses.

Table 1
Students' perceptions of the most important links between Australia and Asia

PRIMARY STUDENTS
SECONDARY
STUDENTS

Nature of the Link
N = 281
89% response
%RESPONSE 1
N = 288
89% response
%RESPONSE 2
N = 123
38% response
%

Trade or business
62
75
26

Tourism

Paper Presented at the AARE Annual
Conference, Newcastle, 1994
Australian Association
for Research in Education

3
3
24

Politics
2
3
13

Geography
14
8
8

Inter-cultural exchanges
12
8
28

Other
7
3
2

TOTAL
100
100
100

It was clear from these data that trade or business was perceived by
students as being the dominant link between Australia and Asia. While
some might express concern at this economic focus, student thinking
does seem to be reflecting recent media emphasis on Australia-Asia

economic ties and aspirations.

Student perceptions on Asia's leading economies and (in the case of
secondary students) their reasons for their opinions were also sought.
Primary children were asked to name a "rich" country and a "poor"
country in Asia. Of the 95% of students who responded, 35% named
Japan, 23% China, 9% Singapore, and 8% Hong Kong and Indonesia
respectively. Vietnam was most often cited as a poor country (23%),
followed by Indonesia (16%) and China (13%). When some Asian countries
are simultaneously classified as "developing" and "tiger" economies or
"a dynamic Asian economy (DAE)", a label used by OECD, these
conflicting responses are not surprising.

In the case of secondary students, a much larger proportion (87%)
identified Japan as a leading Asian economy. Reasons for nominating

Japan included trade (26%), technology (17%), and human resources and manufacturing (15% respectively). Most secondary students (85%) were able to correctly name a major business or industry involved in trading with Asian countries.

All students were asked to name the most important exports and imports between Australia and Asian countries. For both primary and secondary students, foods (often listed as specific items such as wheat, rice) dominated the responses. Secondary students also nominated manufactured goods, natural resources and technologies.

These findings suggest that Gerber and Wilson's (1994) recent concerns about students' lack of socio-economic knowledge may not be as widespread as they thought. From this research, it seems that students in schools with an emphasis on Asian Studies across the curricula are beginning to understand the nature of economic links in the regions. That development of understandings that first focus on relations between Australia - their home country - and Asia, with which they have some direct experience, is not unexpected given our understanding of how children construct their knowledge.

Pursuing the idea that development of intercultural understanding is dependent on a sound knowledge base we asked primary students to "name one really important thing that has happened in Asia in the last 100 years"; and secondary students to identify "two of the most important historical events in the Asian region since 1900". Student responses to these questions (Table 2) suggest a more limited knowledge of significant events impacting on socio-political life. In fact, many students seemed to find the question quite difficult with 25% of primary and 29% of secondary students omitting it. For students who responded, wars (World Wars, the Vietnam and Korean wars) tended to dominate their perceptions of history. This was particularly true in the case of secondary students. This finding, reflects a strong Eurocentric perspective, probably shaped by a combination of media, family and community discourse, and school history curricula. Encouragingly, 30% of primary students listed contemporary political events with another 13% listing natural disasters. The omission of the latter category for secondary students may reflect use of the word "historical" in the question.

Table 2
Students' perceptions of important (historical) events in the Asian region

PRIMARY STUDENTS

SECONDARY STUDENTS

Nature of the Event
(One event requested)
N = 238; 75% response
(Two events requested)
N = 228; 71% response

World Wars
8
54

Asian Wars
14
48

Wars - not specified
14
0

Natural disasters
13
0

Festivals, sports, cultural events
7
7

Contemporary politics
30
38

Other
3
4

Unclear or ambiguous
11
4

TOTAL
100
155

Migration and tourism
Student responses to questions about countries in Asia from which there
is significant migration to Australia and countries providing
significant numbers of tourists are summarised in Table 3. Since
primary students were asked to name just one country in each case and
secondary students two countries, figures should not be directly
compared. However, valid comparisons can be made based on the relative

frequencies. Although high proportions of both primary and secondary
students appropriately identified Japan as a major source of tourism,
both groups incorrectly named Japan as a major source of migration.
Some students in both groups made clear distinctions between migration
and tourism for Vietnamese people. Secondary students were specifically
asked to comment on differences between their responses to each
question. However, 63% of those responding indicated no difference in
source countries of migration and tourism. Of those indicating
differences only 8% were able to explain differences appropriately.

Table 3

Students' perceptions of Asian countries providing migrants and
tourists to Australia

PRIMARY STUDENTS
(One country requested)
SECONDARY STUDENTS
(Two countries requested)

Country
Migration
n = 300
95% response
%
Tourism
n = 300
95% response
%
Migration
n = 300
95% response
%
Tourism
n = 300
95% response
%

China
27
21
51
59

Hong Kong
4
4
3

7

Indonesia
9
12
16
7

Japan
29
41
47
91

Korea
1
2
6
4

Malaysia
3
2
6
4

Singapore
2
4
3
6

Taiwan
3
1
2
2

Vietnam
17
5
37
2

Others
5
8
21

7

TOTAL
100
100
192
188

Finally, students were asked to draw some Asian countries on a map
already containing a picture of Australia. Primary students were asked
to locate

●the country of the pen pal (selected in questions about intercultural
understanding)
●two other countries in Asia
●two major cities.

A summary of students' knowledge of locations of Asian countries and
cities is shown in Table 4. For the 216 (83%) primary students who
attempted this question, the countries drawn most frequently were China
(by 39% of students), Japan (13%) and Indonesia (11%). Cities most
frequently marked were Tokyo (by 38% of students), Beijing (23%) and
Jakarta (12%).

Secondary students were asked to locate the country of their pen friend
and at least two other countries and two cities on the map. These
students seemed to find the task more daunting than did the primary
students with some 30% of secondary students not able to draw a country
(range of countries drawn was from 0 to 22) and 69% not able to
correctly locate even one city (range 0 to 10). An overall locational
accuracy mark was allocated to the maps according to the scale
indicated Table 4. While primary and secondary students' marks are not
directly comparable because different marking "standards" were applied
to take account differing cognitive development, the younger children
performed quite creditably on what was a difficult task. A high
proportion of secondary students had little or no idea of the locations
of countries or cities. This limited knowledge of Asian geography is
consistent with Gerber and Wilson's (1994) findings. The orientation,

juxtaposition and spatial configuration given to the countries included
in students' maps warrant further study in their own right in that they
reflect perceptions of their place in the region and their relationship
to other countries. These will be discussed in a future paper.

Table 4
Students' knowledge of country and city locations

Description	Mark	PRIMARY STUDENTS		SECONDARY STUDENTS	
		n	%	n	%
No idea	0	40	13	121	43
Some idea of relative locations	1	116	38	59	21
A good idea	2	86	28	51	18
A very good impression	3	66	21	49	18
TOTAL		308	100	280	100

There were no clear indications that students' knowledge of Asia varied as a function of their State/Territory of residence, their gender, or country of birth or language spoken at home.

Sources of knowledge
The importance of different sources of information in developing

knowledge of Asian peoples and countries was assessed by asking
students to rate the impact of the media, school classes, relatives or
family friends, school friends, their reading, and visits to other
countries on their understandings. For both primary and secondary
students, school and the media were considered to have the greatest
impact on learning. Some 51% of primary students rated school classes
as most important (on a 3-point scale) with 33% of secondary students
rating school "very important" (on a 4-point scale). The corresponding
figures for the media were 48% and 30% respectively with other sources
receiving considerably lower ratings. The high rating of the media in
providing information about Asia is consistent with Lancley and Laws'
(1994) finding of a strong media influence on year 8 and 10 students'
perceptions of Asia. That students in the current study rated school as
a slightly more important influence than the media may reflect their
schools' Magnet School status and special focus on Asian curriculum
perspectives.

(b) Categories of responses for intercultural understanding

In order to gain insights into students' developing intercultural
understandings we asked them to imagine they could choose a pen friend
in an Asian country. We expected this task would afford them an
opportunity to view the pen friend's culture as it might be seen by an
insider, the perspective Hanvey (1981) considered reflected the highest
level of intercultural understanding. Students were asked to indicate
why they selected the country and what their pen friend might tell them
about his or her life and country. A third question probing in what
ways are Asian countries alike was also designed to elicit responses
that might reflect understanding of the richness and diversity of Asian
cultures.

Table 6 indicates that students were most likely to nominate a Japanese
pen friend.

Table 6
Preferred country for a pen pal

Level
Preferred country
% of students nominating
country

Primary

Japan
Indonesia
China
Vietnam
Korea
25.6
17.2
15.9
7.1
0.9

Secondary
Japan
China
Indonesia
India

Hong Kong
(Korea) (rank 9)
39.5
15.2
12.3
5.2
4.5
(2.3)

Further analyses indicated that choice of country was strongly
associated with the opportunity to study a corresponding national
language in school. This was especially true in the case of Indonesia
for both primary and secondary schools, and Japan for secondary
students. Lancely and Laws (1994) have reported that Japan, along with
Hong Kong and Singapore were countries that year 8 and 10 students most
wanted to visit, largely, because of their modernity and "good
shopping". Countries perceived as "poor" and "war torn" were least
likely to feature as worth visiting. Few students said they wanted to
see countries because they had learnt about them or their languages in
school.

Interestingly, although India forms a major part of Asia and there are
large numbers of Indians living in Australia, there was rarely any
reference to its geography, peoples or cultures. In the eyes of the
students we surveyed, Asia consisted of those countries in North
Eastern Asia (China, Japan, North and South Korea, Hong Kong and
Taiwan) and South Eastern Asia (Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia,
Singapore, Vietnam etc). And, languages from these countries, rather
than Southern Asia (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka)
are those likely to be taught in schools.

Analysis of students' responses to the three questions probing intercultural understanding: Why select this country? What would a pen-friend tell you? and How are Asian countries alike? yielded five categories. The process of categorisation involved the grouping, integration and generalistation of recurring ideas, similarities and core elements expressed in responses. The content and structure of each grouping was then refined and labelled in terms of the key components of "intercultural understanding" described above. This required examining texts with the intention of understanding students' intent irrespective of the words or the examples used. The resulting categories have been ordered in an hierarchical manner ranging from little or no intercultural awareness and beginning awareness to understanding of fundamental human qualities as unifying dimensions and the interdependence of communities.

Level 1: Limited awareness of cultural or ethnic differences other than from a personal or egocentric perspective. For example, "I like Chinese food'. It is assumed that all groups share similar cultural traits and values and that these are similar to those held by the respondent.

Level 2: Awareness of very visible cultural traits that are interpreted as exotic or novel. For example, "They all eat rice" (Grade 6 male) and "They all have black hair" (Grade 6 male). Individuals may begin to question cultural practices and may be concerned with obvious issues of prejudice or oppression.

Level 3: Awareness based on based on rational or scientific knowledge. Students can contrast and explain differences and identify shared elements.

Level 4: Awareness and appreciation of more subtle cultural traits. Valuing cultural diversity and appreciating different historical perspectives.

For example, "A lot of different countries have Gods of some kind and they all have very strong ways of praising them" (Grade 5 female); "I think they are alike in some ways but their selfs and their countries are different as well" (Grade 6 female); "They are not alike, they all have different cultures, customs and spiritual beliefs, different languages, different attitude to politics" (Grade 6 female).

Level 5: Students indicate an ability to internalise multiple perspectives, recognise interconnectedness and interdependence of human societies and appreciate how another culture feels from the standpoint of an insider.

Table 7 shows percentages of student responses at each level of the hierarchy.

Table 7
Categories of intercultural understanding

Level of Response	PRIMARY STUDENTS (N=316)			SECONDARY STUDENTS (N=323)		
	Why this country? %	What would pen pal tell? %	How are Asian countries alike? %	Why this Country? %	What would pen pal tell? %	How are Asian countries alike? %
Irrelevant	0	0	2	0	0	0
1. Personal or egocentric	41	10	17	21	10	15

2. Exotic or novel
24
5
3
13
2
2

3. Rational or scientific
7
22
31
17
22
48

4. Low cultural understanding

8

47
27
31
50
20

5 High cultural
understanding
37
6
4165

   Language related
          17

           2
          16
          15
           0
           9

TOTAL
100
100
100
100
100
100

Further analyses indicated that students' levels of intercultural
awareness were similar across states and there were no indications of
significant relationships between intercultural understanding and
students' country of birth or language spoken at home. As anticipated,
given that development of intercultural awareness is considered to be
age related, there was a trend for higher level responses (4 and 5) to
be made by older children both at the primary and secondary levels.

Support for the developmental nature of intercultural awareness can be
found in the psychological literature. Mature intercultural
understanding, for example depends on the ability to view a situation
from the perspective of an insider. It's not until early to mid
adolescence, according to Selman's (1976) model of "perspective
taking", that children begin to successfully take the view of a third
person and realise that the social system in which they operate is the
product of shared views of the member of a society. Individuals,
however, may still take both egocentric and non egocentric perspectives
in the same context.

There are some indications too, that recursive thought- reflective
cognitive endeavour that involves thinking about what another person is
thinking, undergoes rapid improvement during early to mid adolescence
(Miller, Kessel & Flavell, 1970). This age-related maturity would help
explain older children's better ability to think about what their
pen-pal would think and tell them about his or her culture.

Interestingly, male and female students' intercultural understanding
scores were significantly different in both the primary (female mean =
4. 3 and male mean = 3.6, t-value = 3.85; p< . 001) and secondary
grades (female mean = 4. 6 and male mean = 3.9; t-value = 3.7; p<
.001). Explanations for girls' greater intercultural awareness may lie
in their greater emotionally sensitivity as a function of social
expectations, their ability to better articulate their responses due to
greater language maturity, or their ability to respond more
empathically to messages than boys (Halpern, 1992).

While further quantitative and qualitative analyses of student
responses and relations between student characteristics, knowledge of
Asian socio-political contexts and intercultural understanding are
underway, no major trends have emerged at this point. Students'
geographical knowledge, however, as demonstrated by the ability to
correctly locate Asian countries and cities does appear to be
moderately related to intercultural understanding. There was a moderate
correlation (r = .7) between the score for correct location of cities
and intercultural understanding for secondary students and between the
overall map location score and intercultural understanding for primary
students (r = .6). The r-squared values of 49% and 36% respectively,

indicated a moderate relationship between the variables.

Summary

In this paper we have reported on students' knowledge of Asia,
generated descriptive categories of intercultural understanding and
described students' developing notions of intercultural awareness. This
work is intended to serve as a basis for further research on assessing
and promoting intercultural understanding. Little is known, at present,
on how children's intercultural understanding develops during the
school years and what strategies might best afford opportunities to
promote interculturalism in educational contexts.

Overall, students' responses to specific "knowledge of Asia" questions
indicated that they were developing a sound knowledge of basic Asian
economic and trade issues. This knowledge seems to reflect recent and
concerted government and media emphases on economic restructuring and
more global, particularly Asian, economic, trade and manufacturing
initiatives, rather that than Asia specific curricula in schools. As
noted in previous studies, students' knowledge of Asian geography and
major cultural/historical events was less well developed.

Analyses of responses to questions about the imaginary pen friend
designed to probe intercultural understanding, revealed that many
students were beginning to comprehend and appreciate the diversity and
differences between cultures. Older students especially, were starting
to recognise the interdependence of cultures and were able to view a
situation as it might be seen by a members of the specific culture. At
the same time many students were not able to project beyond their own
reference system and considered their "pen friend's" culture only in
terms of their ethnocentric perspectives. Others, while taking into
account differences in cultures tended to distort the differences,
viewing cultures as more or less inferior to their own, and turning
differences into value judgements. Not unexpectedly, some students
seemed to interpret "differences" as "problems".

That many students' perceptions of Asian cultures were categorised as
"egocentric" and "novel" is in keeping with their cognitive maturity
and the complex and developmental nature of intercultural awareness.
Encouragingly, there were many students who appeared to be developing
higher levels of intercultural awareness. Older students' greater
intercultural understanding reflects, at least in part, the notion that
maturity of perspective taking increases with age (Selmen, 1976).

Evidence that media were influential in shaping students' perceptions
also helps explain stereotypic views of Asian cultures that were
included in the "novelty" category. Popular knowledge of Asia
generally includes the facts, interpretations, and beliefs that are
institutionalised within television, movies, videos, records, magazines

and newspapers, and from glimpses into the lives of Asian families living in Australia. This knowledge often consists of misconceptions, stereotypes, and partial truths. Problems arise when popular knowledge conflicts with the reality of the school, wider community, or specific cultural groups and their practices both here and in Asia (Banks, 1993).

Implications for curriculum
A major goal of teaching for intercultural understanding is to permit adequate partnership in an intercultural context and there are a range of strategies for promoting intercultural awareness and competence. At the same time, students bring their own cultural experiences and expectations to the classroom, formed by the family, community, nation and beyond. These intersecting dimensions work together to create a rich basis for exploring the cultural richness and diversity. According to Willinsky (1992) schools need to capitalise on the educational value of these cultural orientations, and elaborate their connections and histories to expand students' horizons and enhance intercultural communication. Camilleri (1992) too, highlights the value of experience and knowledge about each system, but points out, that this knowledge will also highlight the "surprising, bizarre or shocking". Thus, she stresses the importance of starting from a point that considers all cultures as being legitimate and drawing on contemporary anthropological knowledge of culture. In particular, she advocates starting from where a culture emanates and judging it wholistically, rather than with reference to other cultures.

This position forms the basis of a pedagogy of relativism as applied in cultural anthropology. This means that a culture is comprehended without application to oneself. This attitude is distinct from tolerance, in the usual sense of the term, in that the propensity for a value judgement is reduced. To highlight avoidance of judgement Camilleri proposes an accent of "situational" perspectives, that show how a range of cultural traits can be explained rationally and within the systems evident in the environment.

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