

Submission to the Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee  
on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

## **Strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region**

### **"Education as a Vehicle for Transformation"**

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Dr Florence Boulard is an academic and associate dean of learning and teaching, currently working at James Cook University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Education from the University of Queensland. Her passion for learning and teaching led her to complete a Master of Education in 2011, followed by a PhD in Education in 2018. Her thesis has a strong focus on Australia's relationship with its East-side neighbours through the vehicle of education. Dr Boulard who is originally from New Caledonia, became an Australian citizen in 2010. Her teaching, research and engagement work focuses on creating a more Pacific literate Australia for the benefit of both Pacific Islanders and Australians alike.

### **Proposal Summary**

Despite Australia's proximity and engagement with our Pacific Island neighbours, little is being done to expose young Australians to this part of the world. In fact, the Pacific Islands remain nearly invisible in the Australian curriculum, a key document enabling teachers across the nation to plan, teach and positively impact the lives of young Australians each year.

Embedding Pacific perspectives within the Australian curriculum so that Pacific Island nations can become part of the conversations, minds and hearts of Australians, is a critical step in positively transforming our relationship with our Pacific island neighbours. While there are pockets of positive practice that exemplify such engagement in schools, the majority of the work done in promoting Pacific awareness is led by the Department Foreign Affairs and Trade. For example, the New Colombo Plan offers authentic opportunities for Australians to engage with the Pacific Islands. As a university lecturer, I have been able to notice first-hand some of these life changing opportunities and the subsequent shift in perspectives in my own students. However, it is clear that these opportunities are accessible only to a small percentage of Australians.

The curriculum is a crowded place but there are currently missed opportunities in the Australian curriculum to positively influence Australia's relationships with countries in the Pacific region.

This proposal highlights some of those missed opportunities and offers some recommendations.

## Background to Proposal

As an educator who has worked in both the school and university sectors in Australia, much of my career coincided with the “Asian Century” discourse that positioned Asia as the most important regional neighbour to Australia. Although I continue to agree strongly with the promotion of Asian languages and Asian cultures, in 2014 I began to advocate that Australian educators were the best placed to additionally educate its next generation about a region of the world that otherwise often remains invisible: the Pacific Islands (which I also refer to as Australia’s East-side neighbours).

I aspire for a future in which the East-side neighbours of Australia receive stronger attention for the benefit of Australians and Pacific Islanders alike. The East-side neighbours are a proximal and tangible context for such attention in Australian schools. Their proximity provides the impetus for a shift in curriculum from a Eurocentric to Pasifika orientation. Paralleling the national priority to attending to the “north-side” neighbours, there are opportunities in Australian schools to develop international mindedness through attention to more proximal “east-side” neighbours.

Australia should encourage Pacific perspectives to be embedded within the opportunities offered through schooling because the vehicle of education has proved many times to be transformative (Mezirow, 2000).

Educators working in Australian schools are expected to refer to the Australian Curriculum to assist them in the planning, delivery and assessment of knowledge, understanding and skills across a range of learning areas. Even before teachers are able to stand in front of a classroom, their teacher training requires them to develop a deep understanding of this key document. The Australian curriculum shapes the learning and teaching opportunities that take place each day in the classroom as teachers use this document to support the learning goals that Australia has officially set for all of its youth.

Within each of the learning areas offered within the Australian Curriculum there are three cross-curriculum priorities (ACARA, n.d). These cross-curriculum priorities, which are intended to be embedded and addressed through a range of curriculum learning areas, are known as: 1) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, 2) Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia and 3) Sustainability.

These cross-curriculum priorities provide a targeted frame, often offering specific learning topics or units of work that are designed around these broader common themes. A review of the current Australian Curriculum demonstrated that opportunities for students to develop Asia literacy were comprehensive across all year levels and subject learning areas (Boulard, 2017). Support is also often available for embedding the cross-curriculum priority number 2. For example, the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) supports Australian teachers and school leaders to access a range of digital resources and learning opportunities to ensure young Australians are adequately equipped to engage with our northern neighbours in the future. According to the AEF: *“Asia capability means that every student will exit schooling in Australia with knowledge and understanding of the histories, geographies, arts and literature of the*

*diverse countries of Asia. Asia capability is strengthened in students who also learn an Asian language.”*

On the other hand, opportunities to teach about the Pacific are often left at the discretion of the classroom teacher. In fact, there are only four compulsory learning opportunities in the Australian curriculum focused on the Pacific. These include a unit for students in Year 3, a unit for students in Year 8 focused on the Polynesian Triangle, a Year 10 History task focusing on nuclear testing in the Pacific and finally, the French language classroom. While there might well be some isolated world class exemplars of teaching and learning that have been contextualised within a Pacific setting, these remain at the discretion of the teacher (Rose, Quanchi, Moore, 2009). These are not prescribed by the Australian curriculum and therefore, left optional.

At present, Australia's engagement with the Pacific is represented predominantly by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). While DFAT's role is critical and necessary, it is insufficient if Australia is truly aspiring for a future in which, not only the North but also its East-side neighbours, are in the minds of Australians. The Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies (AAAPS) National Report (2009) quoted Helen Hill who explained, *“Australia is constantly in the minds of Pacific Islanders, whereas the islands are rarely in the minds of Australians”* (1990, p.19). This continues to occur today. In 2015 former Minister of Education and Training, the Honorable Christopher Pyne, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with New Caledonia which led to the development of a number of “Section Australienne”, which are middle and secondary school subjects taught in English to French native speakers with specialised curriculum content focused on Australian literature, Australian history and Australian geography. These subjects are taught in specialised classes and students later sit tests accessing their knowledge of Australia through their final Year 12 certificate, also known as the baccalaureate. In contrast, the current Australian curriculum neither proposes New Caledonia or other East-side neighbours as a focus of study, nor emphasises them with any priority anywhere within the curriculum. This contrast illustrates one example of the uneven positioning of the educational priorities of Australia and the East-side neighbours.

The early 2000s saw significant political momentum for the inclusion of Asian perspectives in the curriculum, including Asian languages. While offering Pacific languages would be a wonderful move forward in strengthening our relationships with our Pacific Island neighbours, it also needs to be acknowledged that adding to the pool of languages offered in Australia would present some challenges as it takes time and resources to train language teachers. However, some schools in Australia which have large populations of students from the Pacific Islands could strongly benefit from having their mother tongue offered and might also have pre-existing capacity within the school community around these Pacific languages. On this note, I think it is also critical that we challenge our classification of languages. We need to stop thinking only of Asian and European languages while also considering the place of Pacific languages in our schools. In particular, French should be seen as a Pacific language because of our proximity with Francophone nations such as New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia.

French continues to be a popular language offered throughout Australia. However, this language is often taught to students from a Eurocentric perspective (Boulard,

2018). In fact, our education system would often categorise French as being a European language. However, challenging the cultural hegemony that exists around the French language could include contextualising the teaching of French for young Australians so that it is transformed into a Pacific Language. With support, French teachers in Australia could transform their practice to help develop knowledge of Australia's Pacific Islands as they navigate the Pacific Ocean in their classrooms.

## Recommendations

Supporting the development of a Pacific literate nation can be achieved. However, **it is impossible to care deeply about something that we know very little about or that remains invisible to many.** Therefore, in order to strengthen Australia's relationship with its Pacific Island neighbours, I invite you to consider the following recommendations:

- 1) Transform the second cross-curriculum priority of the Australian curriculum so that it focuses on **Australia's Engagement with Asia and the Pacific Island Nations**
- 2) Maximise opportunities provided by an already existing workforce and curriculum area, by challenging the cultural hegemony attached to the French language classroom. This could include contextualising the teaching of French within an Australian context (particularly relevant for the East coast) and labelling it as a Pacific Language. This could be supported by professional development opportunities for French language educators so that they can transform their practice and support Australia's vision of becoming a Pacific literate nation.
- 3) Encourage and support the development of educational initiatives at the kindergarten, primary and secondary level that have a strong link to the Pacific.

## Conclusion

The national curriculum of any country represents an autobiographical construct largely representative of the participants involved in its construction as well as the imperatives they hold and seek to accomplish as a nation (Pinar, 2002). If Australia truly aspires to strengthen its relationship with the Pacific region, the Australian curriculum must come into focus. Through the curriculum it is possible to open a window of opportunities that will help to ensure that the Pacific is no longer left at the discretion of educators to expose to his or her students. Authentic relationships and empathy take time to develop. Making the Pacific visible in key curriculum documents will help transform the imagery of the Pacific. In the long term, it will help make this current big blue patch of water more visible and this will benefit both Pacific Islanders and Australians alike. We share a past, a present and an inevitable interwoven future with our Pacific Island neighbours.

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