



# Achieving intercultural understanding in schools

**Maureen Noakes,  
St Paul's School, Queensland**

St Paul's School is a metropolitan, co-educational Pre-Prep to Year 12 independent (Anglican) school located in the northern suburbs of Brisbane. The school, which has around 1400 students, has a significantly above-average [Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage \(ICSEA\)](#) value. Sixteen per cent of students come from a non-English language background. St Paul's has been taking part in China BRIDGE since 2012 and has a partnership with Dongfang Decai School in Beijing, along with other sister schools in China. St Paul's also has a partner school in Japan and connections with schools in Thailand and Indonesia.

## Maureen's intercultural understanding definition

*Intercultural understanding is taking an informed stance between one's cultural perspective and another cultural perspective, as carried through language choices, behaviour and values.*

## Intercultural understanding practice at the school

Maureen Noakes is the Learning Manager for Languages at St Paul's. From a curriculum perspective, she describes how intercultural understanding frames, and features within, the school's Languages programme. At times, issues around culture and identity are raised and discussed in English, Social Sciences and Religious and Values Education, enabling students to explore different cultural perspectives. However, Maureen sees the potential for deeper investigations of culture and intercultural understanding beyond simple

compare and contrast approaches. Maureen also sees opportunities within the curriculum for students to be exposed to different intercultural learning experiences and to develop empathy. To date, there has been some consideration in curriculum planning of the Intercultural understanding general capability within the Australian Curriculum, even though this has varied from one learning area to another, with Languages featuring most prominently.

In Year 8, Chinese language students have engaged in hands-on activities to learn about Chinese arts, crafts, food and festivals; Years 10 and 11 students have sought to enrich their learning experiences by taking part in activities as diverse as learning how to order food at a Chinese restaurant to investigating opportunities to study Chinese at university. For Maureen, a recent highlight was her Year 7 students' participation in the Sunshine Coast Modern Language Teacher's Association Speech Contest. The judges of the Year 7 Division were amazed at the students' high level of communicative competence given that they had studied Chinese for only less than a year.

St Paul's international school partnerships provide opportunities for authentic intercultural experiences. For example, email exchanges with Dongfang Decai, the BRIDGE partnership school, have occurred over the last three years. Interactions within this partnership are predominantly asynchronous (via email and wikis). Nonetheless, the BRIDGE project leaders at both schools have shared their expanded learning and collaboration with other colleagues in order to strengthen the partnership.

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Through the **Language Learning Space**, synchronous (videoconferencing) interactions via weekly Skype sessions are held in language classes to support the development of students' listening and speaking skills in Chinese. Furthermore, the school's in-country learning programmes have been held since 2006. The theme of the most recent programme was environmental, as students investigated Australian and Chinese perspectives of the social use of space. Maureen feels that further work can be done to maximise the intercultural learning opportunities of these visits across the taught curriculum.

Intercultural understanding is also promoted as part of service learning at St Paul's, which is actively involved in Interact and Round Square. For example, students wishing to become Middle or Senior School leaders are expected to volunteer at Soup Kitchen to serve the poor and help build community projects in Vanuatu. Each year, three Year 11 students are chosen to go to World School to take part in discussions with students from other countries about global issues of common concern. Service learning, community service and student leadership are all valued aspects of the school, in accordance with its core mission and values. As a result, serious consideration is being given to the possibility of all Year 10 students going to Vanuatu for two weeks to undertake service learning.

According to Maureen, the school's leadership supports intercultural understanding initiatives by promoting greater teaching and learning autonomy among teachers and students.

Yet, she sees the valuing of language learning by the school community as a persistent challenge. From the perspective of intercultural learning, she wishes to develop greater understanding among parents that language learning is not subversive; rather, it can unite culturally diverse communities. In 2014 and 2015, Roly Sussex OAM, Emeritus Professor of Applied Language Studies at the University of Queensland, spoke to parents at St Paul's about where Languages sit within the school's curriculum and the personal value of learning languages.

Maureen observes that her school is gradually becoming more aware and accepting of cultural diversity. The demand for language learning is growing and there has been an increase in student numbers for Japanese language—taught from Pre-Prep to Year 12—into the senior years. Chinese language is still yet to experience similar progress beyond Year 9. Hence, Maureen aspires to embark on further work to help students, parents and colleagues understand the language-culture connection and ways of working across cultures while maintaining their own sense of identity

St Paul's has been promoting itself as an international school since 2000, and the school has witnessed an expansion in intercultural learning opportunities ever since. For example, it has attracted many short-term (two- to three-week) study tours, mainly involving students from Japan. Hence, Japanese language students at St Paul's can interact with native Japanese speakers at least once every two to three weeks.

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In contrast, international students from China and South Korea stay at the school for much longer, so the challenges of facilitating cross-cultural dialogue with these students are different.

Moving forwards, St Paul's has developed a plan for 2014–2028. Among other objectives, the plan seeks to engage the broader school community in a conversation around the need to understand and value diverse perspectives while addressing issues of common concern.

Importantly, some students have been transformed by their intercultural experiences through St Paul's China Programme. One student wrote in St Paul's Yearly Handbook 2014:

*The 2014 China programme offered me the chance to step out of my comfort zone and to experience what life is like in China. Here in Australia, I had read about China and Chinese ways but I had never been to a Chinese speaking country. I have learnt Chinese since 2010. I really wanted to go to China to see for it myself and to challenge some assumptions I had about China.*

*By the end of the two weeks, the nine students – six from St Paul's and three from the International Montessori School were one big family. I made friends with everyone on the programme and we all worked together to have a great time ... I can see the power of learning another language and I have used my additional language skills to forge friendships with others.*

*Going to China and returning in one piece made me more independent and confident. I faced situations that I had never experienced before, and completed tasks that I had never attempted before.*

## About AEF

The Asia Education Foundation provides teachers, education leaders and school communities with innovative programmes, curriculum resources and networks to support the achievement of Asia literacy for every young Australian.

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## What Works 9

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