ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AS AN EMANCIPATORY SUBJECT

International Perspectives on Justice and Equity in the English Classroom

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CHAPTER 7

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7

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What does Literature offer?

The notion of English as 'emancipatory' carries much of what is regarded as English's 'exceptionalism' (Green, 2018, p. 262ff; 2025). A classic statement of that exceptionalism which suggests something about 'emancipation' comes from Peter Medway, who was always concerned with defining the subject:

> [English] has come to enact nothing less than a different model of education … knowledge to be made, not given; knowledge comprising more than can be discursively stated; learning as a diverse range of processes, including affective ones; educational processes to be embarked on with outcomes unpredictable; students' perceptions, experiences, imaginings and unsystematically acquired knowledge admitted as legitimate curricular content.
>
> *(1980, p. 10)*

Green sees this as a particularly important statement in the exceptionalism history since it situates the curriculum of English as inseparable from its teaching and learning, bringing together 'knowledge, pedagogy and learning as practice' (Green, 2018, p. 280).

However, much of the 1980s and 1990s was devoted to puncturing the claims of English to be emancipatory, especially in its manifestation as Literature, often through the naming of a class-oriented cultural imperialism by Literature. Ball et al. (1990) on the *Newbolt Report* as exemplifying the culture of the ruling classes and quite consciously promoting those values against those sections of society such as 'organised labour movements' (p. 53), or Eagleton on the 'literary canon' as 'fashioned by particular people for

particular reasons at a certain time' (1983, p. 11) are, perhaps, representative views of that moment. Nevertheless, Literature has remained central to the project of English since its inception as a school subject.

What does Literature, in fact, offer students? A recent Australian project in which Wayne was engaged was able to elicit a range of views about why Literature matters from a number of teachers engaged in thinking about the very specific question of literary knowledge: What *is* the knowledge that one wants students to develop in their encounters with Literature in the classroom? In fact, some of the exceptionalism of English arises partly from this contested and controversial question of the relationship of Literature to knowledge (e.g. Atherton, 2005; Doecke & Mead, 2017; Gibson, 2009; McLean Davies et al., 2023; Medway, 2010; Sawyer & McLean Davies, 2021; Simpson, 2013; Swirski, 2007). Literature's 'emancipatory' potential is often expressed as going beyond knowledge. As Glazener (2015) argues:

> Literature can offer knowledge, certainly, but it is usually characterized by its capacity to offer something else: wisdom; enhanced attunement to certain registers of human experience … sharper awareness of the capacities of language as a medium; or intense, transformative experiences.
>
> *(p. 5)*

And we are indeed accustomed to discourses of 'transformative experiences', such as John Stuart Mill's famous description of his recovery from his mental 'crisis' under the influence of Wordsworth's poetry.[1] But, in discussing issues of literary knowledge, what did the teachers in this project say about what Literature was doing for their students? What did these teachers see as the educational project of Literature? Here is an extended selection of some of their comments about the value of Literature in the education of their students (all names are pseudonyms):

- 'There's definitely lots of teaching moments for life in Literature of course, and there's understanding the world, there's becoming more tolerant in understanding the world … But I think also being able to understand oneself, identity … understanding and being able to create a personal narrative … you learn that, I think, by reading other narratives' (Eva)
- '[Literature] allows you to access parts of yourself that you might not access in other ways', as well as accessing 'parts of the world you might not be able to access in other ways' (Clare)
- 'Kids connect with the story and with the characters or with what they go through or their issues and their problems' (Laura)
- 'I think they … get an understanding about themselves, and if they can recognise themselves in a character or not recognise themself in a character, they get an understanding of where their perceptions about the world, where their attitudes, values and beliefs come from and how they

are applied, and then also (about) prejudices they might be applying to other people around them' (Debra)

- Opportunities for 'texts [to] transport you to different times, to different places in the world, and I think just being able to see the world from a different person's perspective, that's the most valuable … and … that is unique to English' (Rebecca)
- 'A way of understanding, interpreting our world and seeing how people work and how society works' (Amanda)
- 'Learning about the world' (Veronika)
- 'Part of what we're doing is opening windows, opening doors into worlds that some kids have never heard of, some kids have kind of dabbled in, but certainly connecting their experiences to a wider lived human experience that helps them to … see a bigger picture of the world … open their eyes, lift their eyes a little bit … that they're not alone, and that … there's value in seeing things from a different perspective and through different modes' (Sophie)
- 'I care about Literature because it reflects the world … and the people you meet, and if you're in a different circumstance but you've tried to put yourself in that context or understand those people, then you can acclimate … your version of reality … and change that and change your perceptions, and try to engage in an authentic manner in that context' (Timothy)

There is an interestingly consistent set of views here about the value that Literature has for their students, which might be summarised as: exposing those students to different contexts of experience and worldviews; and a broadening of perspectives on the world, or presenting the world in conceptually new ways. Some comments, though by no means all, echo what Harold Rosen once referred to as students 'need[ing] to find in literature an illumination (not a reflection) of their lives' (Rosen, 1981, p. 8). The teachers' perspectives suggest that students gain insights into themselves and into a larger world.[2] For these teachers, the potential affordances of Literature also sit inside a sense of student identity development, an opportunity to open up student curiosity about the world, and students connecting and empathising with contexts and characters outside their own lives. These experiences with Literature have the potential to shift students' perspectives by prompting them to imagine other possibilities of existence and examine or re-examine their own beliefs. For some teachers, the latter may entail challenging students' beliefs, ideas and even values:

- 'Knowing who they are, knowing what their place is in the world, how to challenge things … you understand there are multiple interpretations of the world … I want them to question, and I think texts especially allow them to question themselves and the world around them' (Michael)

- 'I want to challenge them, and I want to provoke them, because to me English isn't just building empathy, it's about critical thinking' (Angela)
- Students were 'questioning … the views and values that they had been brought up with, thinking … "Well it's not necessarily the way I'd go anymore … [I] don't have to have this view if it's negatively impacting somebody else. I don't have to be this person"' (Leo)

In general, then, the teachers in this project approached Literature as an 'impulse to make sense of [human experience]' (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 25). Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* reflects something of the views of these teachers. Felski's approach to literary theory is to accept the importance of asking political questions of works of art, but to recognise that Literature can 'bite back' and to treat Literature as not just an object of knowledge, but as a *source* of knowledge. It's a view that resonates with what our teachers are saying. Felski argues that 'one motive for reading is the hope of gaining a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life. Literature's relationship to worldly knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are'. She sees Literature as offering 'a vast terrain of practices, expectations, emotions, hopes, dreams, and interpretations', which are based in textuality, occur in varied and contingent transactions between texts and readers, and offer ways of seeing with attentiveness to the details of milieu and moment that ultimately affect 'our understanding of ourselves and the world' (Felski, 2008, pp. 8, 16, 83). She elaborates on these notions in four key areas, two of which are *recognition* and *knowledge*. 'Recognition' involves coming to see aspects of oneself, including in what seems distant or strange. It also involves a heightened awareness of the density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds, not as universal truths but in the interplay between text and reader: it offers new ways of seeing. 'Knowledge' refers to a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life. The ability to 'expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are' is also not presented as a set of universal truths, but as a means of making possible other ways of seeing. With Ricoeur, she argues that we 'make sense' through models and poetic analogies such as those with which Literature presents us (Felski, 2008, p. 86; see Chapters 1 & 4).

As we've said, Felski's 'motive for reading' here reflects many of the views and pedagogical aspirations of our interviewed teachers. This is not only a question of the role of experiences that students individually and collectively bring to bear to make meaning of a text but the strong sense that the nature of 'experience' itself is at the centre of the subject. Of course, experience *is* brought to bear to understand texts, *and* the understanding of the experience that texts and readers enact is itself the focus of literary study. But also, 'making connections' was a phrase heard often in this project – in the context of making meaning, in the context of engagement *and* as a key intellectual project of the subject. '[C]onnections … into their own worlds' (Laura) seemed not to be just about students' route to understanding, but to be a key

point of the subject itself: Literature as a field for issues that touch on social/ historical/philosophical/psychological worlds (many of which might otherwise exist only outside the formal curriculum). These views reflect those of teachers in other contexts. For instance, when the German scholar Irene Pieper (2020) interviewed teachers in Germany and Switzerland about their priorities in the teaching of Literature in the L1 curriculum for Grades 8/9, 'the potential of literature as a source for intensive encounters around experiential and social issues [was also] highly valued' (p. 129).

These issues raise interesting questions about the kind of disciplined enquiry necessary in a subject in which 'experience' plays such a central part. These teachers convey a sense that 'knowing' relates strongly to personal engagement. Felski (2008) makes the point that these knowledges are rooted in 'the formal and generic properties of literary texts' (p. 83), thus highlighting textuality – the sense of 'Literature as a way of knowing' through representation and through the place of language in meaning-making. Teachers, of course, see the educational project of Literature in large part in terms of what is of consequence to their students. Nevertheless (or perhaps 'accordingly') they highlight the issue of representation. Timothy, for example, and somewhat typically for our teachers, stated that the point of teaching metaphor lay in 'what you really want kids to understand is that … these devices are used to convey [purposes] and to position a reader in a certain way and elicit an emotional response'.

But the value of Literature – and any 'emancipatory' power it may hold – is intimately tied up with what teachers *do* to help students make the connections to which we referred earlier. Teachers are necessarily concerned not just with texts, but also with readers: not just with the curriculum but also necessarily with what Louise Rosenblatt (1978) calls the 'transactions' between texts and readers. We turn to this issue now.

Teachers bringing possibilities into being

Any discussion of the 'emancipatory' potential of English possibly assumes a certain degree of already-achieved emancipation by teachers. We live in an age of government intervention, regulatory frameworks, standardisation and accountability regimes. Within this educational environment, teacher emancipation and agency are not merely constrained; it is noticeably absent from the performativity and compliance discourses that characterise contemporary policy and curriculum documents. There was a time, however, when curriculum discourses actually celebrated teacher agency. Here are excerpts taken from two historical English syllabus documents from the state of New South Wales, Australia – from 1953 and 1971, respectively:

> It is recognised that the syllabus will be used by many teachers, *each of whom is an individual, instructing many equally individual pupils* with widely different abilities and backgrounds. Under these circumstances,

> *teachers should regard it as suggestive rather than prescriptive, and should use it with due regard to the varying needs of the pupils.*
>   *(New South Wales Department of Education, 1953, p. 1, our italics)*

In stating the aims and objectives of English in this way, the syllabus *does not prescribe, even by implication, the details of selection and organisation of any English course.* Within the broad framework of the syllabus, *those responsible for course-planning are free to use their professional judgment to develop their own courses according to the needs of their pupils.*
       (New South Wales Secondary Schools Board, 1971, p. 2, our italics)

Enshrined in the rhetoric of these syllabus documents are: the principle of freedom; the importance of professional judgment; 'suggestion' rather than 'prescription'; and a recognition of individuality and difference rather than standardisation.

One of the great Australian theorisers of curriculum – and pedagogy – in recent Australian history was Garth Boomer. A fundamental tenet for Boomer was the importance of teacher professional autonomy. 'So long as teachers think new thoughts, schools will continue to change', he argued, because 'imminent in every thought is an action, a potential change of direction' (Boomer & Torr, 1987, pp. 2–3). Powerful teaching, Boomer believed, issued from a number of principles – what he called 'essences' – two of which were: *provocation* and *negotiation* (Boomer, 1993, p. 5). The first of these was about producing disequilibrium:

> a state of puzzlement, disquiet or disease in the areas where the teacher is wanting learning to take place … Once the brain is in tension in this way, the learner is intending. Intention is the key to powerful learning. The teacher has the role of producing or arranging for interruption, disturbance, and a kind of itchiness.
>
>   *(pp. 5–6)*

If one imagines, say, a classroom approach to poetry in which students take on the roles of characters in a narrative poem, in order to project beyond their known world to imagine another world, time or place in active collaboration with their peers, a host of possibilities for learning may be 'provoked', in addition to making meaning of the text. These other possibilities may be understood as 'emancipatory' in a number of ways: students making decisions through using their judgement; students collaborating using language; students taking on a degree of responsibility for their learning; and students developing a relationship with the very text itself that is predicated on a kind of playfulness, rather than deference. There is also the harnessing of knowledge and experience to build connections between their familiar world and the unfamiliar world of the text – a degree of connection between what Gee

(1996) calls 'primary' (the store of language, knowledge and ways of being accrued through their lived experience, memories, and imagination) and 'secondary' (specialist discourses, knowledge and skills associated with schooling) discourses. Above all of this sits a level of trust in the students' ability to do these things.

Jackie's extensive research on students' reading preferences raises the second Boomer 'essence' – negotiation. Her research has shown a significant correlation between the scope for student choice and student attitudes to, engagement with and accomplishment in reading. We know that choice is a critical factor in the motivation to read (Dickenson, 2014; Manuel, 2012; Thomson, 1987; Whitehead et al., 1977) and many young people have clear preferences when it comes to what and how they read. 'Reading stories selected by the student' came out on top of the 'most preferred reading experiences' in a 2012 survey (Manuel, 2012). In a broader survey of most and least preferred activities in English more generally in 2022, 'Reading material I have chosen myself' again came out on top (Manuel & Marchbank, under review). This evidence is not suggesting that teachers do not continue to make informed decisions about what students could and should read. What it is starkly highlighting is the importance of careful, informed text selection and the need to create room for negotiation and student choice in the design of reading programs. At the simplest level, integrating and normalising student choice requires a balance of teacher-selected materials, teacher–student negotiated materials, student–student negotiated materials and student self-selected materials.

Further, based on attending closely to student voices on classroom reading and on practitioner enquiries into reading, McGraw and Mason (2017) strongly argue that 'the current focus on technical-rationalist approaches to teaching and learning reinforced by an increased focus on high-stakes testing and rigid accountability processes, is leading to a reversion to … limited interpretations of texts and ways of responding' (p. 17). Their work suggests that when forms of 'negotiation' are undermined by such technical-rationalist approaches to teaching and learning enforced by such testing and accountability processes, then student confidence and, ultimately, their achievements as readers and writers, are also undermined (McGraw & Mason, 2017, 2022).

Teacher professionalism

In presenting the responses we did to the issue of what it is that Literature offers students, we were making the assumption that the key source of 'knowing' around this question is teachers. This is to run against the current de-professionalisation of teaching in which – as manifested in Australia at least – politicians, most of the mainstream media, right-wing think-tanks, publishers of commercial curriculum resources and interests such as the phonics industry seek to remove much of the autonomy of the teacher. One

consequence of such de-professionalisation is the shifting of fringe knowledge to the centre of policy.[3] The effect is 'deliberate mandatory blindness with regards to the specific demands of relevance proper to the encompassed field' (Savransky & Stengers, 2018, p. 143).

We noted earlier the dominance of compliance and accountability regimes in regulating teachers' work (Lupton & Hayes, 2021; Reid, 2019). The most recent and most insidious move in de-professionalisation comes in the form of marginalising teacher expertise in increasing calls to 'relieve' teacher workload burden by outsourcing their classroom planning to commercial entities. A recent Australian think-tank report (Hunter et al., 2022) is an interesting case in point. It states early in its discussion that 'Teachers are struggling with the curriculum planning load' (p. 11), clearly suggesting that teachers are not coping with their planning load. But the relevant paragraph continues:

> A 2021 Grattan Institute survey of 5,442 teachers and school leaders across Australia sounded the alarm on the current situation in schools. A large majority (86 per cent) of teachers said they 'always' or 'frequently' feel like they do not have enough time for high-quality lesson planning.
>
> *(p. 11)*

This, of course, says the very opposite: teachers *want* more time for planning. The 'struggle' with the curriculum load is, in their eyes, *not* the curriculum load, but all of those things that 'get in the way' of that planning. When Jackie and other colleagues surveyed English teachers in NSW (2018), they found that administrative, accountability and compliance demands, especially those associated with monitoring and reporting of teacher and student performance, were preventing a concentration on core work. These demands included high-stakes test preparation, associated data gathering, administration and heightened expectations from the school executive, students, parents and the wider community. They were exacerbated by the speed of centralised curriculum change and policy reform, and by diminished resources and support. Of key interest here, though, was what teachers regarded as the core work being affected by this administrative work. This core work was planning and preparation for lessons; providing feedback to students; and engaging in reflexive practice, creative and innovative teaching, professional learning, dialogue and collaboration. Teachers know that their planning for their students is central teacher intellectual labour – the core of their professionalism (Manuel et al., 2018).

Those areas of 'consequence' that teachers identified as bringing benefit to their students from the study of Literature arise out of teachers' thinking about the disciplinary bases of their subject, and out of what teachers know about the transactions between texts and readers. They arise, therefore, out of disciplinary expertise. Those 'provocations' and 'negotiations', which can enable students to gain that benefit, arise out of teachers' pedagogical expertise. Realisation of the educational project of Literature needs teachers free to

enact practice based on that subject knowledge and that pedagogical expertise along with knowledge of their students. Whatever is 'emancipatory' about the educational project of Literature does not exist in a conceptual, pedagogical or policy vacuum, but depends upon teachers being themselves free to realise Literature's possibilities.

Notes

1 'What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind, was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling, and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. They seemed to be the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of. In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared by all human beings; which … would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind' (Mill, 1971, p. 89).
2 In a separate survey conducted as part of the project, teachers were asked to prioritise their reasons for teaching Literature and 'encouraging students to gain insights and understandings of different human backgrounds and experiences' was the top priority.
3 The phonics industry in fact provides a good example of the centring of such fringe knowledge in the movement of speech pathology to the centre of literacy policy as part of 'the science of reading' in countries such as Australia, England and France. See, for example, Fijalkow (2014).

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