

**Preference, Passing and Fresh Perspectives: Text Selection by
Secondary School English Teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Abstract

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and the national secondary school qualification, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), afford teachers an enormous degree of autonomy over what they teach in their classrooms. This is in line with international trends in curriculum design which shape curricula around generic, open-ended learning outcomes rather than specific content. However, as of yet there is very little research either in New Zealand or internationally into the ways teachers make decisions about what to teach within an environment of great curricular freedom. Accordingly, this thesis investigates how high school English teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand make decisions about which written texts to teach within the context of current curriculum and assessment frameworks. It conducts this investigation from what will be called a modified social realist perspective. This theoretical perspective adapts the classic social realism promoted in the work of Michael Young and others, in order to develop a version of social realism which has explanatory power for humanities subjects, and subject English in particular.

The thesis moves through three main sections: context, theory and findings. The first section details the context in which this study is located, with a focus on how the New Zealand Curriculum and NCEA are clear examples of what will be called the New Curriculum: a movement in curricular reform which advocates for the removal prescribed content and positions the teacher as a curriculum maker, rather than a curriculum implementer. This section also includes a literature review. The second section outlines the theoretical position of this thesis. It shows how classic social realism struggles to account for both the non-abstract and subjective nature of literary experience, and moves from this to advance a 'modified social realism' which incorporates these features of literary experience into its model. The methodology of the study is also included here. Finally, the third section outlines the study's findings. It is shown that given the freedom to choose their own texts, teachers make decisions based on, in order of importance, students' interests, the likelihood of a text succeeding in NCEA assessments, and whether the text will expose students to important perspectives and ideas. This thesis argues that such priorities are problematic, as, from a modified social realist perspective, focusing on student interests and assessment success can limit opportunities for students to be exposed to truly transformative literature. This thesis therefore ends by suggesting three potential reforms which would allow students to encounter such literature more frequently, including enhanced professional development, and a curriculum document with clearer guidelines around the types of texts that students should encounter.

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Introduction

This introduction begins by briefly outlining the focus on this research, including the research questions. It then moves to make a case for the theoretical framework it will adopt, which will be termed 'modified social realism', and provides a systematic justification of the research questions. Finally, it offers a chapter overview.

Focus & Research Questions

Gert Biesta makes a bold claim as to what he believes is one of the biggest problems facing education today. He calls this problem the “learnification of education” (Biesta, 2009, 2010). For Biesta, the idea of “learnification” captures the trend in contemporary schooling to saturate our discourse with talk of ‘learning’. He shows how everyone working in education in the 21st century, from policy professionals to teachers, is constantly talking about ‘learning outcomes’, referring to our educational institutions ‘places of learning’, and trying to create ‘lifelong learners’. To some, this focus on ‘learning’ in the realm of education might seem natural or intuitive. However, Biesta argues that the issue with directing all of our energies towards the act of learning is that paradoxically, we rarely stop to ask *what exactly* is being learnt. The language of learning, he writes, “tends to obscure crucial dimensions of educational processes and practices - that is, aspects of content, purpose and relationships” (Biesta, 2013, p. 6). Learnification means we always ask *whether* learning is happening, rather than what is learnt, why it is learnt, and who learns it.

As a result of the rise of this language of learning, these “obscured” questions of “content, purpose and relationships” have increasingly been left to individual teachers to decide. Whereas in the past centrally prescribed curriculum documents or, more often, exam prescriptions, would have answered these questions, now these documents have been stripped of content (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Instead we have what Priestley & Biesta (2013) call the ‘New Curriculum’: curriculum documents which, in an embrace of learnification, specify only broad, open-ended ‘learning objectives’ and other general competencies (such as ‘critical thinking’) which students should master. The New Curriculum, for reasons that will be fully explored in Chapter One, demurs on questions such as “what are we learning, and why are we learning it” (Priestley & Biesta, 2013, p. 4), and instead leaves decisions about these vitally important questions up to

individual teachers, positioning them as “independent curriculum makers” (Ormond, 2017, p. 599), rather than simply curriculum implementers.

However, despite this significant shift, very little extant research explores the ways in which teachers make crucial decisions about content selection within this ‘learnified’, high-autonomy environment, either from a descriptive (i.e. what factors drive teacher decision making) or normative (i.e. how should teacher decision making within this context be evaluated) perspective. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to investigate teacher decision making within this environment of curricular freedom, taking as its particular focus the way in which high school English teachers in New Zealand select written texts to teach in their senior classrooms. Expressed as a research question, this focus is as follows:

What factors do teachers of subject English in Aotearoa New Zealand consider when selecting texts for use with senior students?

The term ‘subject English’ is used from here on in to refer to English as it is studied at high school. This is standard practice (see Christie & Macken-Horarik, 2009; Locke, 2015) and allows a distinction to be made between high school English and the parent discipline of English literature. In addition to this main question, the following sub question will also be asked:

Do teachers of lower-SES (socio-economic status) students have different text selection practices to those teaching higher-SES students?

The selection and specific focus of these questions will be justified shortly below. However, in order to give this justification, it is first necessary to outline the theoretical position this thesis will take.

Theoretical Position

This thesis will adopt a ‘modified social realist’ perspective. This position, which this thesis itself will lay out, offers a version of social realism which, it will be argued, is more applicable to humanities subjects, and subject English in particular, than the current ‘classic’ social realism. ‘Classic’ social realism, succinctly put, is a theoretical position which holds that some knowledge is ‘more powerful’ than other knowledge, and that knowledge which is powerful is principally that which is produced by specialist disciplinary communities. It does not hold a positivist view of knowledge, in that it does not assert that knowledge arrived at through inquiry is absolutely true

for all time. However, contra relativism, it adopts “an emergentist rather than a reductive view” (Moore, 2013, p. 346) of knowledge, where it is believed that through disciplined inquiry, we can slowly arrive at knowledge which is more true, even as that knowledge is constantly open to critique and revision (see also Morgan, Hoadley & Barrett, 2017, p. 1). For social realists, this knowledge, typically referred to as ‘powerful knowledge’, is most commonly that which is comprised of “sets of interrelated relatively abstract concepts, which take human understanding beyond the level of everyday awareness” (Beck, 2013, p. 186). In this, it is distinct and separate from everyday knowledge due to its “explanatory power” (Muller & Young, 2019, p. 6). Social realism offers a robust critique of open-ended curricula structures, as it allows one to see how they can lead to eschew the important question of which knowledge might be most powerful for students to acquire. In this sense, it is a useful theoretical lens to bring to bear on the questions this thesis asks.

However, as will be argued more fully below in Chapter Three, there are a number of senses in which social realism proper is not compatible with subject English. Firstly, there is social realism’s privileging of abstract concepts, which may be the most powerful aspects of science subjects, but are not always the most powerful aspects of English. Literary texts can at least sometimes be powerful because of their portrayal of something particular, rather than their portrayal of an abstract ‘truth’. Secondly, there is the issue of social realism’s privileging of knowledge produced by disciplinary communities, which is less applicable in subject English owing to the deeply subjective nature of textual analysis and the way in which the reader inevitably plays at least some part in determining the meaning, and therefore significance, of a text. Thirdly, there is social realism’s use of the term ‘knowledge’, which does not adequately sum up what a student might take away from a literary work: sometimes literature’s power is in the way it moves us emotionally rather than the knowledge we gain from it *per se*. It is in responding to these three critiques that this thesis determines to mark out its ‘modified’ form of social realist analysis. Drawing on the work of Zongyi Deng (2018), ‘modified social realism’ broadens the idea of knowledge to ‘content’, and asserts that, for English at least, the question of which content is ‘powerful’ must to some extent consider the positionality of the student, as well as the views of experts in a discipline, in a way perhaps not true for sciences.

Justification of Research Questions

The above sections have given some justification of why enquiring into content selection practices is important, why social realism offers a useful theoretical starting point, and also why it must be

modified slightly to be useful in an analysis of subject English. However, it remains necessary to justify this thesis's focus on New Zealand, on English, on the senior secondary school and on written texts, and also to justify the particular concern with comparing the experiences of teachers of low SES and high SES students.

Firstly, why focus on New Zealand? Aside from the obvious practicalities, New Zealand is a valid site of study for two reasons. Firstly, there is broad agreement that it offers a clear example of somewhere where 'learnification' has taken hold and where a 'New Curriculum' that offers great autonomy over content selection to the individual teacher is present (Locke, 2000; Wood & Sheehan, 2012; Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Ormond, 2017, 2019). Because of this, it becomes an excellent context through which to investigate how teachers operate within this new policy environment, especially as more and more nations move towards models of curricula design which emphasise practitioner autonomy over content selection (see for example Ers, Kalmus, Autio, 2016; Min, 2019). Further to this, as will be fully addressed in the literature review, there is very little empirical research on content selection in New Zealand high schools (though see McPhail 2013; McKirdy, 2014; Hubbard, 2017; Ormond 2017; 2019), meaning this study will contribute to our understanding of New Zealand in particular.

Secondly, why focus on English? It is the case that there is a small body of extant literature on the selection of texts in English (see for example Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015; Grieg & Holloway, 2016). However, almost all of this is focused on teachers in countries which have retained fairly prescriptive curricula and/or assessment systems, meaning that it does not adequately investigate how English teachers might operate in a high-autonomy environment. There is a very small body of work on text selection in New Zealand, which is limited in scope. There are just two studies, one with a sample of 17 teachers (Hubbard, 2017) and another with 19 teachers (McKirdy, 2014). Therefore, there is still a need for more data to help us understand English teacher decision making in New Zealand. Finally, English is important. As a subject which students must typically take for longer than any other at high school in New Zealand (it is typically compulsory for four of a student's five years), it has a prolonged impact on students' lives. Given the time we dedicate to it in school timetables, it is important we think deeply about what content students are exposed to during their study of it.

Thirdly, why focus on just the senior school, which will be defined here as the final three years of high school, Years 11-13? The first reason is practical: in a small-scale study such as this, a tight focus is useful. In addition, however, focusing on the senior years will allow me to investigate the ways the national assessment system, NCEA, may or may not shape teacher decision making. It is often posited that in an environment with high degrees of autonomy over

content selection, assessment concerns can come to dominate teacher decision making (Wheelahan, 2010; Yates & Young, 2010; Smith, 2019). This study will allow me to test this hypothesis.

Fourthly, why focus on only written texts? It is first worth clarifying what is meant by 'written texts' in this study. For our purposes, this refers to any written literary document that is primarily consumed by reading, rather than by way of another mode (e.g. listening, viewing and so on). This need not just be a novel: poetry, autobiography, personal essay, short story and a plethora of other modes are included. The one limitation is that these are written texts which are studied for their literary qualities, i.e., they do not include, for example, example essay paragraphs a teacher shares with a class to read. Rather they are to be read as 'literature'. The debate over what precisely counts as 'literature' or 'literary' is of course a vast, contested domain (see Génette, 1993; Lamarque, 2008), which this thesis cannot explore at length. For our purposes here, written texts will be included if a teacher deems them worthy of study for an assessment task which asks students to respond to written texts. These assessments demand some engagement with 'literary' qualities of a text (e.g. form, style, literary devices and so on), so act as a sufficient guideline for this study. It is worth noting that all texts discussed by teachers below clearly fall into the category of 'literary', in that they all fit into 'standard' literary categories such as novels, poems, short stories and so on. There are no border-line cases, such as a teacher using something like a recipe book as 'literature', for example. Focusing only on written texts is done largely for pragmatic reasons. Almost all of the international literature on both subject English, as well as that on the academic discipline of English Literature, assumes that 'English' is synonymous with written texts rather than visual or oral ones; subject English in New Zealand is somewhat of an outlier by including all of these in its curriculum. Therefore, for a project this size, focusing only on written texts avoids the challenge of having to adjust, discount or expand various theories I draw on which are not directly applicable to a vision of subject English which includes the study of film and other visual texts. This study could have looked at teacher decision making in other areas not related to text selection, such as what kinds of creative writing tasks teachers set, for example. However, at least for now, the study of texts remains at the centre of English, meaning that focusing on text selection allows me to focus on what are perhaps the most significant content selection decisions a teacher makes in the English classroom.

Fifthly, why focus on comparing teachers of low-SES vs. high-SES students? This focus emerges out of a concern expressed by Young (2008) and other social realists. This concern is that in a curriculum framework where decisions about content are handed over to individual teachers, there is a risk that these teachers, under various pressures (personal, school-based

and others), will end up selecting easier, less ‘powerful’ content for lower SES students. For example, if a teacher is under pressure to get higher pass rates, they may opt to select an ‘easier’ novel which will allow a student to perform well in an exam in the short term, while limiting their ability to develop skills and knowledge which they may benefit from in the long term, which they may only acquire from a more ‘difficult’ novel. Such a move goes against what Young (2014) calls the “entitlement to knowledge” (p. 30), that is, the right of all students to have access to the most powerful knowledge that exists. It is clear that lower SES students missing out on powerful content is not inevitable, as teachers still have the capacity to expose students to rich, challenging material. However, the fact that there is a risk that lower SES students in particular may inadvertently be damaged by an environment of curricula autonomy means that this question is worth investigating.

Boundaries of This Study: What It Is Not

Finally, before progressing, it is important to note from the outset what this study is not. This is not a historical account of the rise of learnification, the New Curriculum and its impact on subject English in New Zealand. It does not even seek to offer a comparative account of subject English and the way English teachers have selected texts before and after the “curricular turn” (Priestley & Biesta, 2013, p. 1) to learning-outcome focused, open-ended curriculum and assessment systems. Instead, this thesis is purely concerned with mapping the way in which teachers can be seen to operate within the autonomy offered to them by current curricula structures. It makes no claim to understanding changes over time and instead simply explores the world as it is.

Secondly, this study does not investigate the way in which a text is actually taught once it enters the classroom. This is a significant limitation, as the way in which a text is taught has an enormous impact on what a student actually learns from encountering it. Unlike Pythagoras’s theorem, for example, which can perhaps be said to be ‘learnt’ or ‘not learnt’, what a student might take from a literary text is highly dependent on what a teacher *does* with it in the classroom (and, indeed, how a student receives it). For example, Grossman (1989) offers a widely-cited example of two different teachers teaching Hamlet. One teaches it over seven weeks, focused on the theme of ‘linguistic reflexivity’. The students read the whole play in class, and then conduct detailed close readings of key soliloquies. Another teacher teaches Hamlet over two weeks, never actually asking students to read the whole play. Instead, they focus on a couple of key scenes, and students are asked to imagine how key scenes might relate to their lives, with in-class focus

questions such as “how might you feel if your mother divorced and your father started dating another man?” (p. 24). It is clear that in cases like this, while both classes may have ‘studied’ Hamlet, what they have learnt from this experience is vastly different. However, it is not possible for a study of this scale to investigate both how teachers select texts and how they teach them. In this sense, this study is far from the final word on the influence of New Curriculum approaches to English: it simply begins to sketch out a brief picture of how teachers behave with regards to one defined aspect of English teaching.

Thirdly, it is also important to note that this thesis purposefully positions itself chiefly within broader debates about curriculum reform and curriculum making, rather than English-specific debates. It analyses text selection from the perspective of Biesta’s theories and its own modified social realist position, rather than with reference to the wide range of literature which is concerned more specifically with trends in the study of subject English. In this approach, this thesis follows Yates et al. (2019) when they write that the goal of their ‘Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Making of English Teachers Project’, which draws on similar theorists and concerns to this work, is “not primarily to take up the ongoing debate within subject English itself about approaches to literary studies... but rather to consider this from the broader perspective of curriculum frameworks” (p. 52; see also Davies & Sawyer, 2018). My reasons for doing so also follow Yates et al. (2019). Firstly, this approach allows the study of text selection in English to also offer more general insights into the selection of content within an environment of curricula autonomy, as already discussed. Secondly, this approach may also offer fresh insight to those more concerned with “the ongoing debate within subject English itself about approaches to literary studies”, by bringing perhaps a somewhat novel perspective to bear on what could be seen as older debates over what literary studies is or should entail. It is possible that future studies could usefully bring scholarship focused specifically on subject English into dialogue with the work this thesis seeks to conduct, but such an ambition remains outside the scope of this project owing to its limited size.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into three main sections: context, theory, and findings. Each of these sections is covered over two chapters.

I. Context:

Chapter One provides the context for this study, outlining Priestley & Biesta's (2013) concept of the New Curriculum alongside Biesta's concept of learnification, and showing how the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and NCEA, can be understood as part of an international trend towards open-ended curricula focused on 'learning' over specific content. In particular, this chapter highlights the way in which both the NZC and NCEA offer an unprecedented level of autonomy to English teachers to decide what material students will encounter in their classrooms. Chapter Two then offers a literature review, surveying two key areas: extant international and New Zealand literature on text selection practices in high school English classrooms, and the small literature on content selection practices in other subjects in New Zealand. These two chapters set the scene for the investigation to follow.

II. Theory:

Chapter Three constructs the theoretical framework used by this study. A detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of social realism is offered, ultimately revealing how it is not entirely suitable for understanding subject English. A 'modified social realist position' more appropriate to the analysis of English is then put forward, drawing on Deng (2018), as well as other theorists who have specifically considered subject English. Chapter Four then provides an account of my methodology, including an account of my sampling practices, approach to data analysis and ethical considerations.

III. Findings and Discussion:

Chapters Five and Six focus on an analysis of the data. Chapter Five outlines the three main themes found in the data, which focus on the three major factors teachers identified when discussing their text selection practices: student preferences & positionality, the influence of NCEA, and the ability for students to access new ideas and perspectives. It also provides three separate discussion sections attached to each of these themes. It concludes that from a modified social realist perspective, teachers rarely make decisions which allow students to access powerful content, though there are some notable exceptions to this. Perhaps surprisingly, it is shown that there is very little difference between teachers of high and low SES students when it comes to the decisions they are making, and the reasons for these decisions. Finally, Chapter Six offers a

summative discussion, and puts forward three recommendations for how the policy architecture which governs subject English in New Zealand could be reformed so that students are given more opportunities to access powerful content.

Part I: Context

Chapter One

Context & Background: The New Curriculum and New Zealand

This chapter first establishes a framework to understand contemporary curricula, drawing on Priestley & Biesta's (2013) concept of the 'New Curriculum' and Biesta's (2010) concept of learnification. These concepts are selected as tools to unpack the state of contemporary curriculum and assessment policy because they clearly highlight the changes that have taken place in the policy space, and also make clear the way in which these changes have created a new role for the individual teacher to be a curriculum maker to a much greater degree than was previously possible. After introducing these concepts, this thesis then demonstrates how New Zealand's NZC (The New Zealand Curriculum) and NCEA (The National Certificate of Educational Achievement) are clear examples of the New Curriculum in action, with particular reference to the way the NZC and NCEA position subject English. The chapter ends by highlighting how these documents establish a policy framework which figures the teacher as a highly autonomous curriculum developer, a positioning which sets the stage for inquiring into the ways in which English teachers make decisions about what texts to use in their classrooms.

The 'New Curriculum' and the 'Learnification' of Education

In 2013, Priestley & Biesta identified the emergence, at least in the Anglophone world, of what they called the 'New Curriculum'. From Scotland to New Zealand, Canada to England and many places in between, a radical "curricular turn" (Priestley & Biesta, 2013, p.2) occurred, starting with the development of the National Curriculum of the United Kingdom in 1988. These new curricula saw the central government take over the role of determining the focus of senior secondary schooling, removing the power to a greater or lesser extent from various exam boards and subject-specific syllabus committees. What emerged from this centralisation naturally varies from place to place, and some nations, such as England, have since rolled back many of the New Curriculum features they were once at the forefront of implementing (see for example Smith,

2017). However, a few core trends emerge. Priestley & Biesta (2013) outline these features of the New Curriculum as follows:

- 1.) **A tendency to focus primarily on capabilities & competencies.** Previously, most curricula documents (which were often exam syllabi or subject-specific guidelines), specified content that students should master, i.e. they were focused on that 'what' of education. In the 'New Curriculum', a focus on the 'what' is replaced by a focus on 'who' students should become. Capabilities focused on are usually broad, such as being a 'confident individual' or an 'effective contributor'.
- 2.) **A focus on child-centered approaches.** These curricula tend to explicitly state that teachers ought to be guided by student interests and passions, and that students should be engaged in determining what exactly they are learning about. This focus emerges out of heavily constructivist theories of education (see Biesta 2011; 2012) which position knowledge not as something didactically 'transmitted' from teacher to student, but something that to some degree is constructed by the student themselves based on their own experiences and subjectivity.
- 3.) **A focus on outcomes rather than inputs.** When content is mentioned, it is largely framed not in terms of inputs, i.e. what books students should read, historical events they should study, or what physics theorems they should know, but rather in terms of more generic outputs, i.e. what students can do. For example, in history a curriculum document may no longer specify the exact topics or events students should study, but may instead say something like 'a student can explain the causes of historical events'.
- 4.) **An emphasis on the teacher as a central agent of curriculum making.** As a result of having a curriculum focused on student agency and broad-based competencies, the teacher becomes more central in the curriculum design process. They are figured less as one who transmits curriculum and more as an individual who designs curricula for the individual students in front of them (see Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, 2012).

The factors that have led to the New Curriculum taking the form that it has are complex. However, most accounts position the formation of the priorities of the 'New Curriculum' as

representing a complex negotiation between two ostensibly diametrically opposed forces in education: progressivism and neoliberal instrumentalism. Yates & Collins (2010) write that in Australia, a New Curriculum (they do not use this term, though they describe essentially the same features) emerges out of “the combination of a rather utilitarian and progressivist child-centered education on the one hand, and a growing impact of ‘evidence-based’ auditing and benchmarking on the other” (p. 90; see also Allais, 2012; Priestley & Sinnema, 2014; Prøitz & Nordin, 2019; Yates & Young, 2010).

Pedagogic progressivists are concerned primarily with centering the child and their interests in curriculum making, eschewing ‘traditional’ canons of knowledge and supporting the holistic development of the student (Muller, 2001; Yates & Collins, 2010). They are not to be confused in any way with political progressives on the left. To these promoters of child-centred learning, the autonomy the New Curriculum gives the teacher and the student makes a lot of sense. When students are measured against generic outputs rather than specific inputs, a teacher is free to cater to each individual child, who is imagined simply as constantly developing in their own time and at their own pace, along Piagetian lines. From this point of view then, the New Curriculum is a tool for social justice and liberation. No longer constrained by content and prescription, the student is allowed the freedom they deserve to pursue their own interests at their own pace, and the teachers is free to support them in this. Teachers themselves tend to see the New Curriculum in this progressive light (see Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, 2012).

On the other hand, an instrumentalist approach heavily favoured by business interests concerned with the production of workers, and global organisations such as the OECD (2005) focused on human capital development, also manifests in the New Curriculum. By neatly specifying a series of apparently measurable outputs, rather than inputs, it becomes easier for the state to track student performance in a more regular and precise way than was previously possible. This ‘scientific management’ of student learning and progress, which Wayne Au (2011) has termed ‘New Taylorism’, then allows a wealth of data to be built up, which opens up a variety of opportunities, from pinpointing deliberate teaching interventions to making decisions about teacher pay and school funding based on this data. The focus on capabilities and competencies over content also appeals to this school of thought, because of the prevalent belief that it is more important for workers in the global economy of the 21st century to have a series of ‘transferable’ skills such as adaptability and critical thinking, rather than have knowledge of specific academic domains (see Lauder et al, 2012; Morgan, 2016; Williams, Gannon & Sawyer, 2013). It has also been argued that child-centrism “fits with the ontology of neoliberalism - of liberalism’s concern for the individual” (Robertson, 2012, p, 595; see also Robertson, 2005). In other words,

neoliberalism's concern with positioning humans as individuals, (individual consumers, individual non-unionised workers, individual citizens concerned with our own wellbeing and not those of others - see Harvey, 2005), finds perhaps at least a Weberian elective affinity with child-centred educational theories (see Zepke, 2015).

There is significant debate around which of these two forces has shaped the New Curriculum the most. Priestley & Biesta (2013) see an “unholy alliance” (p. 3) between the two, with both having had a relatively equal hand in developing this new *status quo*. Wheelahan (2010), offering a different perspective, suggests that in reality neoliberalism is the driving force, and it has simply co-opted progressivist language, all the while orienting curricula in an essentially “technical-instrumentalist” (p.5) direction. This thesis does not have space to conduct its own historical investigation into this question here, and of course, the influences on curricula change vary from country to country. What is important to understand when it comes to the substantive analysis this thesis conducts below is that both of these forces, child-centred progressivism and neo-liberal instrumentalism, have had a significant hand in shaping modern curricula.

As discussed in the introduction, Gert Biesta (2010, 2012, 2013) has called this move towards the New Curriculum part of the broader trend toward “learnification” in education. Biesta has highlighted the fact that as part of a movement away from specific content and towards a vision of students simply “as cognitive developers moving onwards and upwards in their cognitive processes” (Yates & Collins, 2010, p. 93), education has become totally dominated by the ‘language of learning’. Students are figured no longer as students but as ‘learners’, teachers become ‘learning facilitators’, schools become ‘places of learning’, and curricula become centred on ‘student learning’, with the ultimate goal of producing the ‘life long learner’. The move to a focus on an active verb, ‘learning’, foregrounds the act itself, problematically ignoring the fact that, as Biesta (2013) writes, “the point of education... is never just that students learn, but that they learn *something* and that they learn this for particular *reasons*” (p. 6, italics in original). For Biesta, the “learnification of education” and the New Curriculum eschew the difficult question of content, of what students should know, with proponents satisfying themselves with the idea that as long as learning of some kind is occurring, that is a good thing.

New Zealand and the New Curriculum

Priestley & Biesta (2013) identify New Zealand as one of the primary sites where a New Curriculum has been implemented. In what follows, a brief overview will be provided of how New

Zealand's curriculum and NCEA fit into the New Curriculum framework, with particular attention to subject English. Again, it is important to reiterate that this thesis is not a historical inquiry, so there is no space here to engage in a comprehensive history of curriculum and assessment change in New Zealand. Although a little background information will be offered, the goal is simply to sketch the state of curriculum and assessment as it is now, in order to establish the context through which the data gathered below about text selection is interpreted.

Although the New Zealand curriculum document has many antecedents, much of its current form can be traced back to the launch of the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (NZCF) in 1993 (Elley, 1994; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). This document saw the development of what Elley (1994) calls an "eight-level progressive structure" (p.38), with each academic subject split over eight levels, with each level prescribing a series of learning outcomes which were meant to become more challenging and complex as a student moved from level 1 to level 8 (see also Locke, 2000). This was coupled by a section dedicated to "essential skills" and "values" including such things as communication, numeracy, problem-solving, self-management and others (Ministry of Education, 2008). Although writers such as Elley (1994) critiqued the NZCF from the outset, highlighting for example how the eight-level structure had no basis in research on children's learning, and how the vagueness of the learning outcomes, such as "respond to language and meaning in texts" at level 1 for 'reading' in the English strand, meant that teachers may struggle to design appropriate curricula, the essential form of the NZCF was replicated in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (henceforth NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007b).

The NZC moved from defining "essential skills" to defining "key competencies", borrowing the OECD's language developed in the DeSeCo report (OECD, 2005). The specific 'competences' named were altered somewhat, and the exact wording of the learning outcomes, called 'achievement objectives', was also adjusted, with the number of, and level of detail in, these outcomes reduced. However, the overall form of the NZC very much followed the NZCF. The only substantive addition the NZC made to the NZCF document was the inclusion of a section explicitly dealing with pedagogy and curriculum implementation which broadly embraced the constructivist ideals of the New Curriculum (Wood & Sheehan, 2012; Hipkins, Johnson & Sheehan, 2016), stating such things as "look for opportunities to involve students directly in decisions relating to their own learning" (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.35).

It is clear then that New Zealand's curriculum documents were in line with the principles of the New Curriculum from relatively early on: there was a focus on broad capabilities, outputs and constructivist pedagogies. However, for some time the relatively restrictive, exam-based assessment systems which continued to dominate New Zealand education did not necessarily

allow teachers the freedom the NZCF, and later the NZC, promised over things such as content selection. The arrival of NCEA in 2002 changed this, bringing a “seismic shift” (Hipkins, Johnson & Sheehan, 2016, p.3) to the way students were assessed in New Zealand. Under NCEA, students complete a series of ‘standards’ each worth a number of credits. Some standards are assessed internally by schools through a variety of tasks (everything from essays to community projects), and some externally, largely by exams. Students simply need to gain a certain number of credits from passing a certain number of standards to gain a National Certificate of Educational Achievement. This move to what is called ‘standards-based assessment’ aligns perfectly with the New Curriculum impulses. Firstly, because there are no standards which were ‘compulsory’, teachers (and, in certain circumstances, students) are free to select which standards they do, a move which embraces a child-centred outlook, where standards might be matched to the ostensible needs of the student, rather than the teacher being guided by the idea that a student should master particular content and skills within a certain time frame. Secondly, it is important to understand that many standards are largely “decontextualised” so as to focus on “generic skills rather than content” (Fountain, 2008, p. 140; see also Ormond, 2011, 2019). This decontextualisation occurred less in STEM subjects. However, in the humanities and social sciences, the dominance of generic learning outcomes for each standard, rather than the specification of content to be understood, is near total, as will be seen below in the specific examples from English. This move to learning outcomes brought assessment into direct dialogue with curriculum, meaning that both were focused on generic skills and competencies.

With NCEA and the curriculum in lock-step, the position the teacher within the system began to change. No longer were they imagined simply as transmitters of a curriculum, but rather they are figured as a curriculum maker, as “the one who plays the central role in engaging with the question as to what is educationally desirable within each concrete situation” (Biesta, 2012, p. 39). For example, the NZC actively asserts that it when it comes to content, it allows “teachers the scope to make interpretations in response to the particular needs, interests, and talents of individuals and groups of students in their classes” (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p.37). The question of this thesis is, of course, what teachers do within this framework which has moved very quickly to give them a profound amount of power over content selection and sequencing.

New Zealand, the New Curriculum, and Subject English

Examples of the freedom afforded to teachers can clearly be seen with reference to examples drawn directly from subject English. A comprehensive overview of how subject English is represented in the curriculum and NCEA standards is not possible. However, some examples here are sufficient to give an idea of the context within which English teachers are working. With regards to the NZC, it is possibly most useful to look at level 6. This is the level which maps onto NCEA level 1, the level of NCEA most frequently referred to by the participants in this study. All levels of the English curriculum document are organised into two skill-based categories, “listening, reading, viewing” and “speaking, presenting, writing”, a feature which already foregrounds more general skills over discipline-specific knowledge. Within each category, specific ‘achievement objectives’ or AOs are given, with ‘indicators’ given below. Here is one such example, the AO on “ideas” under “listening, reading, viewing”:

- Show a developed understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

INDICATORS:

- makes meaning by understanding comprehensive ideas;
- makes connections by interpreting ideas within and between texts from a range of contexts;
- recognises that there may be more than one reading available within a text;
- makes and supports inferences from texts independently. (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p. 32)

The classic features of the New Curriculum are evident here: largely generic, outcomes focused statements concerned more with what one can ‘do’ than what one knows, and the absence of specified content. Locke (2008) describes sections like this as examples of “the accelerated sacrifice of content (or disciplinary knowledge) on the altar of competency” (p. 296). The genericism and breadth inherent in the curriculum document are matched in the NCEA standards. It is perhaps most useful to look at the only standard where a student *must* respond on a written text (as opposed to a visual or oral one), given this thesis’s focus on written text: 90851 ‘Show understanding of specified aspect(s) of studied written text(s)’ (NZQA, 2019c). The criteria against which this assessment is judged is simply as follows: “show understanding of specified aspect(s) of studied written text(s), using supporting evidence”, with “show

understanding” changing to “convincing understanding” and “perceptive understanding” if one is to be awarded the higher grades of merit and excellence respectively (NZQA, 2019c, p. 1). The only other substantive information given about the standard is what ‘specified aspects’ may include (purposes & audience, ideas, language features and structure). As this assessment involves an examination, it is also important to understand what the exam questions look like. Below are half of the exam questions from the 2019 exam:

Describe how at least one character or individual in the text accepted change. Explain why the character or individual willingly accepted this change.

Describe an important idea in the text. Explain whether or not you think this idea is relevant to teenagers today.

Describe how techniques have been used in the text. Explain how these techniques have been used to create a particular effect. (NZQA, 2019a, p. 2)

It should be apparent that both the assessment criteria and the questions themselves are extremely open-ended. By focusing just on the outcome of “show understanding” of a text, or, if one turns to the NZC, “show a developed understanding of ideas”, there is what Locke (2008) calls the “evacuation of content knowledge” (p. 296). Teachers are free to select whatever content they like, and indeed are encouraged by the curriculum to do this with reference to “the particular needs, interests, and talents of individuals” (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. 37).

It is clear then the principles of the New Curriculum are present in both the NZC and NCEA when it comes to subject English, with broad, largely generic, outcome-focused statements and criteria dominating both the achievement objectives and achievement standards. The NZC and NCEA therefore eschew what Yates (2017b) calls the “normative question” (p. 5) - the question of *what* content students should encounter. This important question is left up to the individual teacher. The question now is how teachers operate within this environment. Before reaching the discussion of the data from this study which attempts to answer the question, however, it is necessary to review what others have said about this, in the literature on teacher text and content selection.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter begins by surveying literature which relates to text selection both internationally and in New Zealand. The literature is limited, but a clear picture emerges of teachers in international contexts heavily constrained by prescriptive curriculum and assessment systems, who subsequently choose to teach relatively 'traditional' or canonical texts which are prescribed and/or strongly incentivised by these systems. The opposite picture emerges in New Zealand, where an open-ended curriculum and assessment policy framework leads to teachers developing other motivations for selecting texts, from personal preference to a text's suitability for NCEA assessment. This chapter ends by situating this thesis within a broader literature focused on content selection in the New Zealand senior secondary classroom, in order to better contextualise this study within debates about the teacher-as-curriculum-maker in this country. This literature again reveals that, free from tightly bound curriculum and assessment prescription, teachers often take into account student interests much more strongly when selecting content.

Text Selection in Subject English

There is a difficulty in addressing research on text selection in subject English, as in one sense, an argument could be made that large swathes of research on subject English are to some extent about text selection, given the centrality of texts to the subject. For example, any proponent of the canon, or of including multicultural voices in English classrooms, or of encouraging wide reading, is in some sense concerned with text selection. However, there is also a specific body of work which deals directly with the text selection practices of individual teachers in their classrooms, and it is that literature which I will address here. It is possible to divide this literature into three subsections: theoretical work on text selection (i.e. research which makes normative claims about how teachers ought to make decisions about which texts to teach), empirical work on text selection (which attempts to describe current teacher practices) and New Zealand-based research on text selection.

Theoretical Work on Text Selection

The extant theoretical literature on text selection practices is principally concerned with arguing that teachers need to make text selections that align with student interests and represent the diverse student bodies typically seen in developed anglophone nations. For example, Gallo (2001) argues that canonical or 'classic' literature alienates young readers who do not relate to its character and themes, and that teachers should put student needs at the forefront of their text choices. Schieble (2014) and Benton (2000) likewise assert that where possible, teachers need to eschew the canon and base text selections on "their local contexts and students' interests and needs" (Schieble, 2014, p. 163). The argument is that if students are personally engaged in the texts they are reading, they will be more engaged in their work, and it will be more meaningful to them. Sharma & Christ (2017) make a similar argument, but come from a specifically multiculturalist perspective which is particularly prevalent in text selection literature, asserting that teachers need to select texts which are "culturally relevant" (p. 295) and directly connected to the lives of the diverse group of students they are likely to be teaching. They argue this is necessary both to engage diverse students in schooling, and also to more broadly challenge societal narratives about what is significant - i.e. it is not simply that which is produced by white males. All of these researchers are writing from within national contexts that retain in their schooling systems, whether through exam prescriptions, lists of 'recommended texts' or other means, a strong focus on teaching a traditional, white, male canon. These writers are therefore interested in encouraging teachers to act against the state's prescriptions where possible. This body of literature is useful background to this study, but sits awkwardly against the New Zealand context where, as discussed above, an impetus to teach the canon has been all but removed from the curriculum.

Empirical Work on Text Selection

The extant empirical work on teacher text selection takes up similar concerns to the theoretical work in the sense that it largely explores the pressures that result in teachers selecting from a relatively conservative range of canonical texts, and attempts to understand what might allow teachers to select a more diverse or immediately 'engaging' range of texts. The most common factor many researchers found driving teacher text choice was any given text's ability to meet the needs of national/state/local curriculum or assessment, either because certain texts were on a

prescribed list or because they would meet specific requirements of curriculum or assessment (Grieg & Holloway, 2016; Holloway & Grieg, 2011; Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). Other factors were also identified, including the influence of a teacher's department (Darragh & Boyd, 2019) (which may in turn be influenced by national/state/local priorities), a lack of resourcing and professional development to learn about different texts (Darragh & Boyd, 2019; Grieg & Holloway, 2016; Holloway & Grieg, 2011; Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015) and the readability of texts (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). As a result of these factors, these studies conclude that literature studied in high schools appears largely unchanged in these studies since the 1950s, with the most common texts selected by teachers across the various studies consistently being 'classics' by white male authors such as *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *Animal Farm* (1945) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). These studies thus further confirm Applebee's (1989; 1992) influential finding that the top 10 texts in American high schools remained almost entirely the same from 1963 to 1988.

These researchers posited a range of different solutions to this issue, from greater prominence and resourcing for school libraries to assist teachers in accessing different texts (Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006), to moving away from culturally ingrained practices such as whole-class novel studies towards personalised reading programmes for small groups or individual students based on those students' abilities and cultural background (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). The empirical literature thus maintains the perspective outlined above in the discussion of the theoretical literature: that student interests and needs, especially their cultural background, ought to play a much greater role in text selection decisions made by teachers.

Research on Text Selection in Aotearoa New Zealand

Text selection research in Aotearoa New Zealand exists in a starkly different context to the largely British and North American research discussed above. As McKirdy (2014) puts it, instead of relatively prescriptive lists of texts produced by the central authorities in most nations, in New Zealand "there are no rules" (p. 48) and teachers are more or less free to choose whatever texts they like. The two empirical studies we have on New Zealand teachers' text selection process draw substantially different conclusions on the question of whether this is ultimately positive or negative. McKirdy's (2014) study reveals that there is little consensus amongst teachers about what texts should be taught for any individual year group, and that teachers prioritise selecting texts with 'themes' which students will be able to write successfully about in the exam (as this

focus on discussing theme is what the exam rewards), rather than considering whether a text is at an appropriate level of difficulty, or whether it will ‘challenge’ students. She concludes that more national guidelines are needed, and that a lack of these means that students are often treated unfairly by either being given books which are much more difficult, or much easier, than peers at different schools.

Hubbard (2017), on the other hand, is largely supportive of New Zealand’s *status quo* because it allows students’ particular interests and cultural backgrounds to be catered to. She uncovered three main factors influencing text selection in New Zealand which were, in descending order of importance: potential student enjoyment of the text, teacher enjoyment of the text, and its suitability for NCEA assessments. The fact that student engagement is the teacher’s top priority, as opposed to the need to meet external curriculum and assessment requirements which figures so heavily in the international literature, is for Hubbard something we must strive “to protect” (p. 92). This is because it aligns well with “a socially-constructed learning approach solution” (p. 85) to literacy issues, where engagement with a text is seen as the first step towards a student engaging with reading and so developing their literacy. Although Hubbard does note the influence of NCEA, she suggests it is a minor consideration for teachers.

Content Selection in New Zealand Senior Secondary Years

In addition to considering the limited work on text selection in English, it is also worth briefly surveying other literature on content selection in New Zealand high schools. There are two reasons for this. The first is that given the limited range of literature on text selection in subject English, this literature gives us a broader sense of the ways in which teachers might be operating under the freedom of the New Curriculum model in New Zealand, and the different ways we can understand or think about this. Secondly, as discussed in the introduction, this thesis aims to comment not just on text selection in English, but on the idea of content selection more broadly. Therefore, reviewing literature on content selection in other subjects is a necessary part of placing this study within this larger context.

There are two senior secondary school subjects in New Zealand which have literature dedicated specifically to examining how teachers make content-selection decisions, by two different authors: Barbara Ormond (2017, 2019) writing on history, and Graham McPhail (2013) writing on music. Both of these authors recognise the New Curriculum context of their work, writing that New Zealand is unique in comparison to many nations in the way that our education policy

framework, with a focus on skills over content, offers a “high level of autonomy” (McPhail, 2013, p. 8) to teachers and thus figures them as not as curriculum implementers as much as they are “independent curriculum makers” (Ormond, 2017, p. 599). However, they each paint somewhat different pictures of how teachers operate in this role.

McPhail (2013), focused on data gathered from six music teachers, discusses how by and large, teachers within this high-autonomy environment “generally attempt to find a balance between affirming student interests... and bringing students into contact with the collectively-developed conceptual and historical knowledge of the discipline” (p. 9). In the case of music, this typically involves teachers using some popular music in their classrooms, while also being driven to expose students to things they may not necessarily attempt to engage with themselves, such as classical music, the history of music, and musical theory. McPhail does worry that the openness of the curriculum may potentially limit student exposure to this later kind of content, but ultimately concludes that, at least in relation to the teachers he talked to for his study, teachers were able to make their classes sites of “both affirmation and dissonance” (p. 18), that is, places which both valued and affirmed students musical preferences and interests, while also exposing them to material outside their experience.

Ormond (2017, 2019), however, suggests potentially more negative effects emerging from our current policy framework on teacher decision making. Also looking at six teachers, she suggests that the openness of New Zealand’s history curriculum and assessment schema means that teachers narrow the range of content that students are exposed to. This is because, in Ormond’s view, New Zealand has such vague curriculum prescriptions for history, such as “understand how the causes and consequences of past events that are of significance to New Zealanders shape the lives of people and society” (Ministry of Education, 2007a, p.37), which are matched with very open-ended assessment tasks and questions, such as “describe the causes of your chosen historical event” (NZQA 2019b, p. 2). Within this incredibly open policy framework, the teachers Ormond surveyed noted that they typically taught fewer historical topics than they may have otherwise been inclined to, because it was easiest from the perspective of the assessment for students to simply know one topic in detail which they could write on. Teachers were also sometimes driven to teach topics that were more engaging or interesting to students, or were perceived as easier for students to write about, rather than those which may ultimately help them better understand the world. For Ormond (2017), this means that what emerges is “piecemeal programming and narrowed portions of historical learning” (p. 614). From her social realist perspective, she asserts that our curriculum and assessment framework do not promote access to ‘powerful knowledge’, something which she believes ought to be a stronger

consideration. Instead, she believes that students may be emerging with detailed knowledge of only a few small areas of history, rather than a broad understanding of the past and the various ways of understanding it.

Conclusion

It is clear overall that the literature on text selection, and more broadly on content selection in Aotearoa New Zealand, is limited. What literature there is does reveal, however, that teachers always make decisions in the context of their policy framework, and that this framework affects those decisions. Internationally, curriculum and assessment frameworks are often still prescriptive. They specify texts which must be studied, or at most give teachers a limited selection to choose from. In those cases, teacher decision making is inevitably guided by these prescriptions. In contrast, New Zealand's adherence to the principles of the New Curriculum means that decision making is guided by other factors: most prominently student interest/ accessibility for students. However, the exact ways in which teachers make decisions within this high-autonomy model, and the ways in which we ought to think about the decisions they make, is far from clear. It is possible to see responsible teachers (or at least, responsible from McPhail's perspective) who are to be commended for balancing student needs and exposure to disciplinary understanding operating in New Zealand, but it is also possible to see teachers who admit to doing something that is, in the words of one of the teacher in Ormond's (2017) study, "very narrow" (p. 612), because that is the simplest thing to do within the current policy settings. It is also possible to celebrate the flexible ways in which teachers operate (Hubbard), or alternatively to worry that this flexibility means some students miss out on important or challenging material (McKirdy). The data analysed below does not provide final answers to the questions of how teachers act and how we should think about these actions. However, it does aim to make an important contribution to this area of inquiry, by using its original theoretical framework to analyse the actions of eight New Zealand English teachers and the motivations behind their content selection decisions. It is to the elucidation of this framework that we now turn.

Part II: Theory & Methodology

Chapter Three

Theoretical Positioning: A Modified Social Realism

This chapter begins by outlining the theoretical position of social realism, with particular attention to the way in which it critiques the principles of the New Curriculum. It then moves to discuss how social realism in its current form is not wholly suitable for analysing subject English. Three critiques in particular will be made: that social realism values abstraction too highly, that social realism values the university-led disciplinary community too highly, and that social realism's use of the term 'knowledge' is unnecessarily restrictive. The chapter therefore moves to offer a 'modified social realist position', which argues that refiguring of knowledge into the broader concept of "content" and a recognition of the highly personal nature of literary experiences will allow a much more powerful version of social realism through which to analyse text selection practices in subject English.

Responding to the New Curriculum: Social Realists and the Call to 'Bring Knowledge Back In'

Social realism is arguably the most prominent critique of the New Curriculum and its eschewal of content in favour of generic outputs and 'learning' (see for example Maton, 2013; McPhail & Rata, 2016; Moore, 2013; Rata, 2011, 2012; Wheelahan, 2010; Young, 2008, 2013). Although social realists have not used the term 'New Curriculum' in their works to date, it is clear that they are explicitly responding to the trends in curriculum development Priestley and Biesta describe. To them, the New Curriculum's focus on general capabilities, and in particular, child-centred, constructivist models of education where content is determined on the basis of a student's interests or background, is inherently problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the move towards generic outcomes and constructivism makes way for, in their view, "a drift towards relativism" (Moore, 2013, p. 335). When one is only thinking about generic outcomes such as, for example, "show a developed understanding of ideas" (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. 35), it is easy to adopt a view that any given content that a teacher opts to bring into their classroom is inherently no better or worse than any other material, as long as it

can be used for a student to meet this, or any other, learning objective. This relativism is a problem for social realists, as they emphatically believe that some content, some knowledge, is better or more powerful than other knowledge (this idea of what knowledge is powerful will be unpacked in more detail shortly). Secondly and relatedly, they worry that the New Curriculum dangerously blurs the boundaries between everyday knowledge, that is, the knowledge a child acquires at home or through 'ordinary' activities, and disciplinary knowledge, that is, the specific, higher-order knowledge encoded in academic disciplines that students can only acquire at school. By relying on constructivist and child-centered ideas, practitioners working under New Curricula are likely, on the social realist account, to develop programmes of study which focus on this everyday knowledge, rather than the more powerful "disciplinary knowledge which disturbs our common-sense understanding of the world" (Rata & McPhail, 2016, p. 59).

In place of the relativism social realists see in the New Curriculum, it is important to acknowledge that they do not seek to advance a purely positivist vision for education, one which sees knowledge as 'fixed' in nature and imagines schooling as "a system for transmitting elite cultural knowledge" (Young & Muller, 2010, p. 16). Instead, theirs is a model of what Young & Muller (2010) call a 'Future 3 curriculum' (as opposed to a 'Future 1' of positivism and a 'Future 2' of relativism). In a Future 3 curriculum, there is an acknowledgement that knowledge is in some sense social in that it is produced by select groups of individuals in certain, historically-contingent circumstances, but, *contra* relativism, it adopts "an emergentist rather than a reductive view" (Moore, 2013, p. 346) of this knowledge generation process. This means that social realists assert that over time, communities of individuals producing knowledge (largely, on their terms, disciplinary communities based in universities) do develop a suite of practices that ensure the knowledge they produce has some truth to it. In this sense, there is an acknowledgement that 'knowledge' does need to be constantly questioned and revised, but also that this process leads towards more stable truths, i.e. knowledge is "historical but also objective" in some sense (Young & Muller, 2010, p. 19).

This set of beliefs finds perhaps its most widely-known normative manifestation in Young's (2008) call to 'bring knowledge back in' to curricula and curriculum theory. Young's assertion is that, following the principles of social realism, some knowledge is indeed 'better' or does offer better access to 'truth' than other knowledge, and it is this knowledge, which Young terms 'powerful knowledge', that curricula need to be built around' (see Muller & Young, 2019; Young, 2008, 2009, 2013; Young & Muller, 2013). For Young, curricula should not be static and designed simply to uphold the power of the elites, i.e. they should not, in Youngian terms, teach us the 'knowledge of the powerful' (KOTP). However, they should also avoid focusing on knowledge

which is most immediately relevant to students' lives; such a model will, in Young's view, simply trap them in their own world and deny them the ability to reach outside of this. Instead, we should base our curricula decisions on whether or not knowledge is 'powerful'. Powerful knowledge for Young is that which is distinct from 'common sense' or 'everyday' knowledge. It is knowledge which has been developed by specialist disciplinary communities, mostly commonly in universities, which, according to Young, gives it much better conceptual and explanatory power than 'everyday' knowledge. As Young (2013) writes, "powerful knowledge is cognitively superior to that needed for daily life. It transcends and liberates children from their daily experience" (p. 118). Specifically, its cognitively superior nature is principally based on the fact that it is theoretical, and thus "can be the basis for generalisations and thinking beyond particular contexts or cases" (Young, quoted in White, 2018, p. 326), or in the words of Beck (2013), is "compromised of sets of interrelated relatively abstract concepts, which take human understanding beyond the level of everyday awareness" (p. 186).

The social realist critique of the New Curriculum and their call to design curricula around 'powerful knowledge' have met a wide range of criticisms, which this thesis does not have space to systematically outline and address. Instead, it will focus below only on those critiques which are either explicitly concerned with, or strongly pertain to, social realism's explanatory power when it comes to subject English, using these critiques as a way to move towards a modified social realist position capable of offering theoretical power in the analysis of this particular school subject.

Social Realism and Subject English: Strange Bedfellows?

Almost every scholar who has considered whether social realism offers a useful lens through which to analyse subject English has been skeptical of its value. Yates et al. (2019) call much of social realist thought "manifestly inadequate" (p. 58) when it comes to understanding subject English, and Docke & Mead (2018) assert that it leads to "a traditionalist and inflexible understanding of literary knowledge that is paradoxically at a remove from the richness of literary studies" (p. 254; see also Doecke, 2017; Yandell, 2017; Yandel & Brady, 2016). However, at the same time, many of these writers agree that social realism has "struck a chord" (Yates et al., 2019, p. 58) with scholars of subject English, as it has highlighted the ways in which the question of what students *should know* in English has all but been removed from both curriculum documents and the broader discourse, "in favour of an emphasis on skills and outcomes" students

in English classrooms should master (Docke & Mead, 2018, p. 254). In what follows, what could be seen as the 'existing' account of subject English under social realism will be outlined, mainly by drawing together what Young and Muller have said about the subject, as well as on the work of Cuthbert (2017, 2019), who attempts to develop Young and Muller's ideas. I will then simultaneously critique and build-upon this vision to reach the 'modified social realist position' this thesis will operate from.

Outlining Current Social Realist Understanding of Subject English

The position Young, Muller and other social realists offer when it comes to subject English, and other arts and humanities subjects in general, is patchy. Although they offer some more extended discussion on subjects such as history (Young & Muller, 2019), the most extensive discussion Young and Muller offer on subjects focused on works on art (such as English or music) runs to just over a page, and they note that "we can do no more than hint at possibilities here" (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 245-246). In essence, literature is figured as largely offering abstract, propositional truths similar to those that science may offer. Young (2014) draws a parallel between the insights of Shakespeare and those of Newton, arguing that just as Newton's laws of motion are "as near to truth as we can get" (p. 64), so Shakespeare's plays offer us "almost universal truths" (p. 65). The nature of these truths from a social realist perspective is not overly clear: Young & Muller (2013) at one point agree that these are not "generalisations in the [scientific] sense we have discussed" (p. 245), but are "universal in the sense of connecting people to a larger humanity" (p. 245). Young & Muller are not clear about what 'connecting to a larger humanity' may look like in practice. Cuthbert (2017), who attempts to develop some of Young & Muller's ideas, writes that literature offers powerful knowledge in that it offers access to universal ideas "through the particular" (p.108) - i.e. unlike a scientific theorem, a novel is both a particular depiction of particular events, characters and so on, and, through this particular depiction, also an insight into something universal (see also Cuthbert, 2019, where she makes very similar arguments). These universal ideas allow students to transcend their daily realities, just as the abstract concepts of STEM subjects do, though the ways they do this are different. For example, a work of literature might allow students to imagine new realities, or "moral and aesthetic alternatives" (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 245).

Cuthbert makes a number of complex arguments about the need for literature to have a "unity of artistic form" (Cuthbert, 2017, p. 112) which utilises oppositional structures to achieve universality, arguments which are often far from clear. However, what both she and other social

realists agree on (see Young, 2014) is that when it comes to asking which texts have power and therefore offer access to these ‘universal’, relatively abstract truths, referring to the canon and to university academics is the best option. This is in line with the social realist belief discussed above that “specialist disciplinary communities” (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 236) are able to define that knowledge which is most likely to achieve a degree of truthfulness. These communities define the “best ideas... whether scientific laws, novels, or engineering designs” (Young, 2014, p. 31).

Critiquing Current Social Realist Understanding of Subject English

The extant work of Young, Muller and Cuthbert offers a useful starting point in developing a version of social realism that works for subject English. However, this thesis will suggest that there are three limitations to the sketch these writers offer. The first is seeing literature purely in terms of ‘knowledge’, the second is overemphasising the value of abstraction and the distinctness of literature from the ‘everyday’, and the third is the weight given to university academics and the canon in determining which texts might have power. I will address each of these critiques in turn.

i.) English and ‘knowledge’. The question of whether literary texts offer ‘knowledge’ is a significant philosophical debate (Lamarque, 2008). Currently, social realists figure literature as offering ‘knowledge’, and imagine this knowledge as something along the lines of ‘universal truths’ or messages which one can extract from a text and which are broadly similar to the propositional truths of science. In moving towards the modified social realism of this thesis, we need to understand that there are two types of ‘knowledge’ related to texts which are not necessarily akin to ‘universal truths’: ‘knowledge about literature’ and ‘knowledge of abstract literary concepts’. We also need to see that figuring the impact of a text purely in terms of the knowledge one gains from it does not adequately account for a text’s affective aspects.

- a. *Knowledge about literature.* Firstly, there is one set of knowledge which there is broad agreement literature (and literary study) offers: ‘knowledge about literature’ (see Green, 2009). When reading a text, one might gather this kind of knowledge, which might include such things as: knowledge of a certain author and their concerns, knowledge of a particular literary style, knowledge of a literary period, knowledge of generic conventions and so on. Sometimes this is gained directly from the text, while sometimes this might be gained from paratextual information

(the book jacket, for example), or from other information provided by a teacher or other source. There is no disagreement around whether or not this is 'knowledge': although, for example, one may have varying degrees of insight into things like an author's style, by and large this 'knowledge' is factual and declarative in nature. Once one has read Witi Ihimaera's (1972) *Pounamu Pounamu*, for example, they should know something about Ihimaera as a key figure in the New Zealand canon and the Māori renaissance, they should know about his style (for example its laconic aspects, its interest in ordinary speech) and something about the subjects he is concerned with in his early works (principally the transition in Māoridom from rural to urban ways of life). If the text is set alongside other texts, or placed in a broader historical context, they may also learn more broadly about the influence he has had on subsequent Māori writers, or about the time period in which he was writing (urbanisation of Māori, the Māori Land March/Hīkoi, the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 and so on). This knowledge is certainly powerful in a sense, in that understanding it can help students begin to understand the world of literature more broadly: one needs to know about a number of writers, periods, styles and so on to contextualise and so better understand and appreciate other writers, periods and styles. Already then, it is clear that there is valuable knowledge which can come from reading a text which is not necessarily the relatively abstract, 'universal truths' favoured by social realism.

- b. *Knowledge of abstract literary concepts.* There is one type of abstract, theoretical knowledge that can be gained from reading literature within the context of subject English which is strongly in line with social realist understanding of knowledge. This is the knowledge of concepts involved in literary study. The idea of symbolism, the idea of the metaphor, or the idea of the epistolary novel as a genre are all examples of such concepts. It is important to distinguish this type of knowledge, as it is not mentioned in the current social realist accounts of English, which focus on the 'universal messages' of a text. This knowledge can be said to have power in the way that it offers students a lens through which to interpret both literature and the world. Understanding the concept of symbolism, for example, allows students to both better appreciate and understand an author's craft, and may also help them interpret phenomena in the 'real world', from advertisements to political party logos.

- c. *Knowledge vs. affective, aesthetic experience.* The above two categories of 'knowledge' do not exist in current social realist accounts of English, but nevertheless, they clearly fall into the category of 'knowledge'. However, when we move beyond 'knowledge about literature' and 'knowledge of literary concepts' and consider whether the broader, more aesthetic experience of reading a text offers students knowledge, significant issues emerge with the social realist conception of literature. The 'universal truths' social realists claim literature offers presumably encompass things like messages we learn about how humans act, how society is governed and so on. It is true in one sense that literature offers us 'knowledge' in this way. This view of literature as offering us a kind of propositional, 'detached' knowledge is known as a "cognitivist" or "efferent" view of literature, where the reading of literature is seen as a highly rational, cerebral act: one reads a book, and extracts a lesson from it (Gibson, 2003, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1994). However, such an account, focused on "detached and theoretical knowing" (Pike, 2003, p. 96) does not fully capture the emotive and psychosocial aspects of engaging with literature. Literature does not simply offer knowledge, but is far more affective: it changes feelings, moods, personalities and perspectives in ways that 'knowledge' alone does not (Gibson, 2009; see also Lamarque, 2008). Considering *King Lear* for example, Pike (2003) concludes that the realisation of one's own cosmic insignificance one might encounter in reading this text is a kind of knowledge, but is quite far from the kind of academic, theoretical knowledge Young appears to be in favour of (see also Walsh, 1969; Medway, 2010). Instead, in the case of *Lear* and countless other texts, literature may be giving us a feeling or insight not easily reduced to a statement. In this way the equivalence drawn between Newton's laws and Shakespeare's plays by Young (2014) may not be quite accurate (cf. Rowe, 2010), or at least, there is in a sense more to literary truth than there is to scientific truth: the former is not purely propositional.

Overall then, it is clear that one may gain some declarative knowledge *about* literature, and literary concepts, from literary texts. These are definitely knowledges, though they are not acknowledged in current social realist accounts of English. However, using the term 'knowledge' to describe what you gain from engaging with a literary text in terms of the

way it changes your ideas, feelings and personhood seems not entirely adequate. Although we do come to know things, we also come to feel things through engaging with literature, and we are often changed by these feelings. It is clear that the way social realists currently talk about knowledge and English needs adjusting to account for all of this.

ii.) English, the everyday and abstract, universal truths. The social realists cited above maintain that subject English's "power" is chiefly located in the ways in which it can help students transcend their common or everyday experience, and allow them access to bigger, near universal truths. There is a sense in which this is at least partly true. It is undeniable that literature can help students to imagine different realities, or "moral and aesthetic alternatives" (Young & Muller, 2013, p. 245). Such things may then allow them to take their lives, communities and societies in different directions. These may be positive or negative visions: Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* for example offers a chilling version of a patriarchal society we should wish to avoid, while much of the poetry of Walt Whitman may help us to think about how to approach life with more joy ('I Sing the Body Electric', for example). However, there are also three distinct problems with this picture. Firstly, it misses the possibility of another type of 'abstract' knowledge students may acquire from literature: the knowledge of literary concepts discussed above. Secondly, it downplays the value of literature which may not explore 'alternatives' so much as deeply enquire into realities a student already knows. Thirdly, it greatly downplays the role which the individual student has in interpreting and so determining the meaning of a literary text with reference to their 'everyday' context. I will address just the second and third of these, the first already being addressed above.

- a. *Literature which explores the 'everyday'.* Much literature does not necessarily show 'alternatives'. Instead, it may very often present our reality back to us, often the most mundane aspects of it. Such literature can be accounted for from a social realist perspective, because it is the case that it still forces us to think about that reality from a different perspective. As Green (2009) writes, "the very act of imagining something to be so [via literature] permits a departure from how things are" (p. 356). It is almost impossible that an author will have the same view on our reality as we do, and so they will allow us to see it with 'new eyes'. It is worth noting the potential value of such literature, as while it can fit within current social realist

frameworks, it is not discussed in the social realist material cited above.

- b. *'Universal truths' and the interpretative act.* The lack of acknowledgement of the role of the individual in interpreting a work of literature is possibly the most significant issue with current social realist theorisation of literary study (see Yates et al., 2019). In science or mathematics, the meaning of a fact is rarely dependent on a student's interpretation of it: the formula for finding the area of a triangle, for example, is context independent. The same cannot be said for the meaning of a literary work. As Rosenblatt (1994) writes:

Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a dynamic situation. (p.1063)

Yandel & Brady (2016), who are directly responding to Young's work, demonstrate this by looking at the interpretation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in two different contexts: England and Palestine. Two groups of students, of similar ages and stages in their education, interpret the text and ideas around familial obligation within it in distinct ways, guided by their cultural context. While the English students were more supportive of Romeo and Juliet challenging their parents and the norms of their society, the Palestinian children were much more sympathetic to the parents of the "star-cross'd lovers". Such interpretative differences led to very different messages being drawn from the text for each group: some saw the text more as an endorsement of the actions of Romeo and Juliet, and others as a critique of these actions. It is important to note that it is not that one of these views simply needs 'correcting'. Although these students could no doubt be supported to see the play from perspectives other than their own, and to read the text closely to justify their interpretation of it, no literary scholar would assert that there is just one 'true' or 'correct' interpretation of what the text has to say about familial obligation. This is the case even if one is simply searching for the way the text would have been understood 'in its time' (which is at any rate a limited way of conceptualising the goal of literary study).

The fact that interpretation plays a role in the reading of literature does not mean that we need to adopt a strident relativism about textual meaning, where ‘any interpretation is valid’. A text still has a limited number of viable readings, and any interpretation must be grounded in a rigorous reading of the text itself, with attention paid to previous interpretations, historical context and so on (one could not assert, for example, that *Romeo and Juliet* is about why we should all commit suicide to spite our parents - no valid and careful reading of the text could reach this conclusion). What it does mean, however, is that we cannot simply imagine texts as existing entirely separately to the world of the ‘everyday’, the social world. It also means that the selection of texts becomes more complex than simply deferring to the academy, as the individual student and the way they read and interpret a text must be brought into consideration, given that the positionality of the student will affect the impact of any given text. This is the final concern to which we now turn.

iii.) **English and the academy.** Social realism’s answer to ‘what texts should be taught’ is to turn to professional disciplinary communities (chiefly in universities) and to the canon (Cuthbert 2017, 2019; Young, 2014). Again, in many respects this is a reasonable claim. Cuthbert (2017) reminds us that university/canonical judgements “are not set in stone” (p. 117). In line with social realism’s “emergentist” view (Moore, 2013, p. 346) of knowledge generation within disciplinary communities, what counts as a ‘worthwhile’ book is always being reconsidered. University communities are likely to be particularly good at, in Cuthbert’s (2017) terms, identifying and promoting texts which have “sufficient aesthetic form to encourage broader and deep interpretations that demand greater imaginative effort” (p. 117). However, while the expertise of university academics is very much worth considering, there are three factors that make university English faculties less *reliable* sources for final judgement of textual quality than, for example, science faculties may be for scientific truths.

- a. *Lack of agreement in English faculties.* Firstly, it is the case that there is much more debate amongst humanities scholars than there is among scientific researchers over what content is important to study (Kagan, 2009). Yates (2017a) writes that unlike the sciences, “the humanities and social sciences do not work

with paradigm consensus, and social and political values are inherent in paradigm differences” (p. 46; cf. Kagan, 2009). Yates has conducted research which shows that while academics in physics have a clear idea of what material students should cover, academics in humanities disciplines (her research focused on history, but she applies her conclusions more broadly) have very little agreement on such a matter. Nowhere is this more true than in English, where members of the academy hold a range of heterogeneous theoretical positions which influence their views on what literature should be taught and how it should be taught, differences which emerge from “social and political values” (Yates, 2017a, p. 46). Even within one department, one might find Marxists, post-structuralists, formalists, post-colonialists and so on, all of whom will have different answers to how a curriculum should be constituted. They may all be able to identify texts which “encourage broader and deep interpretations” (Cuthbert, 2017, p. 117), but no doubt they will often produce quite different lists of texts to be studied depending on their particular concerns. This alone means that it is difficult to turn exclusively to universities in determining what ought to be taught.

- b. *Systemic biases in university faculties.* Many have argued forcefully that university faculties, particularly arts and humanities ones, by nature of who has traditionally developed and staffed them, have inbuilt biases that make using them as the only guide for content selection in schools problematic (see Rudolph, Sriprakash & Gerrard, 2018). For example, it is the case that university curricula in the arts and humanities draw almost exclusively on white writers not because white writers are obviously superior, but because of the “racial domination in the epistemic communities of the academy” (Rudolph, Sriprakash & Gerrard, 2018, p. 26; see also Park, 2013). White academics have built universities, their disciplines and their faculties, and have almost exclusively included work by white people in the bodies of work to be studied. This of course does not mean this work by white writers is *not* worthy of study, and it is also the case that the academy and the content that it is studying are becoming more diverse, in line with the social realist’s view of the academy as able to change and adapt its view of what material is most worth studying (Cuthbert, 2017). However, it does mean that we should be skeptical of seeing the university as the sole source of content-selection guidance.

- c. *The importance of the personal.* As covered in the above discussion, the meaning of texts is to some extent grounded in the individual reader and their context. This means that this must be taken into account in text selection. Although the judgement of the disciplinary community is very useful to refer to, it is also important to think about the student and what might be powerful to them given their unique context. Importantly, this is not the same as thinking about what is just most interesting to them: in the next selection a stronger definition of ‘powerful’ will be advanced that is useful in thinking about how to think about matching texts to students.

The way that social realism has thus far been applied to subject English has some strengths, but also some weaknesses. It is right to identify the power of texts to take us beyond our current contexts, and the value of university disciplinary communities in making judgements about textual quality. However, it has also been shown to be blind to some important kinds of knowledge in English, and has underplayed both the aesthetic, emotional experience texts offer, and the role of the individual reader in generating textual meaning. In what follows, a slightly different model of social realism will be elucidated.

A Modified Social Realism for Understanding Subject English

To develop the modified social realism of this thesis, I draw on the work of Zonyi Deng. Deng (2018) agrees that Young and others are right to draw attention to the turn away from the question of *what* should be taught in schools. However, he offers a slightly different way of thinking about this, drawing on theories of *Bindung*-centred *Didaktik* from German speaking countries, theories which consider what should be taught from the question of the development of persons (see Vásquez-Levy, 2002). Firstly, Deng prefers to talk about “content” rather than social realism’s “knowledge”. This move to “content” is supremely useful for discussing subject English, as it avoids the way in which ‘knowledge’ is ultimately a somewhat narrow term which fails to capture some of the affective power of English. Deng’s central argument is that while social realism does draw attention to many significant issues in contemporary education, we need to move beyond social realism’s privileging of abstract ideas as being *ipso facto* the most powerful material, and need to instead consider the power of material taught in schools in broader terms. He proposes, vis-à-vis *Didaktik* theory, that we consider the power of content in education with regards to the

question of whether or not it is “embodying educational potential - in terms of the potential impact on or contribution to self-formation and the development of human powers and dispositions” (p. 374). The abstract truths valued under traditional social realism will certainly at times support the development of “human powers and dispositions”, but so will other types of content students might encounter. The knowledge of the literary past, for example, may give students greater “power” to interpret the literary present. Similarly, the affective experience of literature, its emotional impact, may change how students interact with others, or how they seek to live their own lives - that is, it may change their “dispositions”. This formulation of power still asserts that consideration of ‘content’, of what to teach, is supremely important and needs much greater prominence, but avoids some of the narrowness of how the question of ‘what to teach’ is approached by social realists.

Deng’s conceptualisation also asserts that while university disciplinary communities are a useful guide to content selection, ultimately content selectors should “ascertain the value and significance of content with reference to individual students with a particular human context in mind, with its attendant past and anticipated future” (p. 375). Such an approach may make less sense for a subject like physics, but makes a great degree of sense for subject English where, as discussed above, a students’ individual context and personhood will have a significant impact on how they understand or react to a work of literature, and therefore what impact it might have on them. Owing to the ‘human’ and social nature of English subject, different works of literature will have different degrees of power depending on, as Deng writes, their “human context”. Therefore, this needs to be accounted for when making text selection decisions.

Importantly, Deng’s position does not lead him to a new kind of relativism, where all content is equal and should be comfortably aligned with a child’s positionality. It still requires careful consideration of which material is ‘powerful’, but it reorients this sense of ‘power’ away from a near-exclusive focus on abstract concepts or universal truths and what university academics may declare to be powerful, and towards the aim of the development of the individual more broadly. Phrased another way, Deng writes that content under his model is selected based on its ability to support “human formation and the cultivation of human powers and dispositions, rather than the epistemological properties, structures and explanatory powers of disciplinary knowledge *per se*” (p. 376). Content for Deng is therefore selected on its potential to help students “open up opportunities for widening their horizons, transforming their perspectives, and cultivating their moral sensitivity” (p. 377). Deng’s theorisation marks out a middle-ground between a somewhat strident social realism and a dangerous relativism embodied in the New Curriculum. He acknowledges the importance of both the views of the disciplinary community and those of

the student, both the value of abstract truth claims, and of other content which may help students to grow and develop as people. In all of this, he is steadfastly committed to seeing content ultimately as a tool of liberation - it should always be ultimately used in the service of expanding student horizons, rather than collapsing them.

Deng's re-framing of social realist thinking allows us to make three final claims which capture the modified social realist position of this thesis:

1. **What is important is content, not knowledge.** This allows for a version of social realism which embraces both the specific knowledge that might exist in subject English, including the aforementioned 'knowledge about literature' and 'knowledge of literary concepts', as well as the broader affective experience which comes from engaging with a literary text (where a text is figured as content).

2. **Abstract, theoretical content may be powerful, but so is other content, as long as it "embodies educational potential".** This proposition allows us to continue to value the abstract content in subject English, such as knowledge of literary concepts like symbolism or genres, which can be said to be powerful because they offer students a kind of conceptual grammar through which they can interpret the world around them, in the same way that theorems in science may enable them to. However, it also opens up the potential for both the aesthetic, affective experience of literature, and the more concrete 'knowledge about literature' to be powerful. In the case of the affective aspect of literature, this may be said to be powerful because it may lead one to a deeper understanding of society or themselves, to reconsider the world with new eyes, and so on. For example, reading *Atwood's Handmaid's Tale* is powerful because it forces us to think about patriarchal structures in our own society, and perhaps also about ourselves and the ways we may be implicated in these structures. In the case of 'knowledge about literature', this knowledge is powerful because it is central to accessing the discipline, and developing a fuller appreciation of texts one might encounter. For example, one will develop a much richer understanding, and therefore enjoyment, of Sally Rooney's popular 2018 novel *Normal People*, if they are able to understand the norms of the Victorian manners novel it self consciously plays with (Suchodolski, 2019), and know of some of the references it makes to writers such as George Eliot and Jane Austen. All texts in some way build on the legacy of past literary productions, and so understanding the literary past in this way is vitally important to understanding literature. In all of these cases, there is great "educational

potential” and a great potential for “self-formation and the development of human powers” (Deng, 2018, p. 374). In the first instance students gain a new conceptual lens through which to approach the world, in the second they develop a much richer understanding of themselves, the world, or both, and in the third they develop the ability to engage in a rich and deep way with literary texts, in a way that perhaps ultimately furthers their ability to gain something from their affective or aesthetic aspects.

3. **The university is a helpful guide when it comes to content selection, but we must also be cognisant of students’ individual backgrounds and the context in which they are learning.** This point acknowledges the fact that highly specialised disciplinary communities certainly have much to offer when thinking about which content is powerful. They are particularly useful when attempting to consider whether a text is historically significant or influential in a given literary tradition, i.e., whether it has had a significant impact on later texts. They may also offer useful guidance around the aesthetic quality of a text, as Cuthbert (2017, 2019) argues. However, as Yates (2017a) highlights, and as has already been discussed, “social and political values” (p. 46) inevitably shape which content university academics in the humanities might prioritise in a way that is much less likely to happen in scientific fields: whether they are a Marxist or a postcolonialist, for example, will inevitably shape their ideas about which texts are most powerful, most important to read. Systemic biases towards white, male authors also exist in university faculties (Rudolph, Sriprakash & Gerrard, 2018). These factors, combined with the fact that the impact and meaning of a text always has a degree of subjectivity located in the reader, means that, as Deng (2018) writes, we must also consider the power of a text “with reference to individual students with a particular human context in mind” (p. 375). Considering both the power ascribed to a text by the community of disciplinary scholars, and the power it may have for individual students at a particular time, allows for a more nuanced consideration of the place of any given text in an English classroom which does not lead to either a blind upholding of the canon at all costs, or a relativism which simply declares all texts as equal. Indeed, it is important to note that considering “individual students with a particular human context in mind”, is not to suggest that we simply select content which these students will enjoy or relate to most strongly. Rather we should be again thinking about “educational potential” and about whether any given text will “open up opportunities for widening their [students’] horizons, transforming their perspectives, and cultivating their moral sensitivity” (Deng, 2018, p. 377). What exactly this might mean,

of course, is to some extent context dependent - the 'moral sensitivity' one group of students may need is different to that another may need.

The use of Deng's *Didaktik*-inspired critique of social realism has allowed the development here of a modified social realist position. In sum, this position continues to emphasise the importance of content, but considers it more broadly: it is not just abstract, conceptual knowledge which is valued (in literature the 'truths' offered by texts), but rather it is all content which has the power to develop students' understanding, and develop them as people. This position recognises the power of deference to the academy and to tradition, but also to a student's unique position. In the long term, such a theoretical position will hopefully be helpful to scholars attempting to analyse subject English, but in the more immediate sense it should allow a meaningful analysis of the data focused on text selection practices in New Zealand English classrooms gathered for this thesis. Before turning to this analysis, however, we must outline the methodology this study has used.

Chapter Four

Methodology

This chapter will briefly outline the methodology used in this thesis. It will begin by discussing the purposive sampling method used, as well as detailing participant recruitment and the use of semi-structured interviews for data gathering. It will then explain and justify the use of inductive thematic coding applied in this study, and explain the process of data analysis and presentation. Finally, it will detail how ethical considerations were taken into account in this thesis.

Participant Selection, Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

This thesis relied on purposive sampling to select its participants. Purposive sampling involves defining specific characteristics of a population of interest, and then attempting to locate individuals who have these characteristics (Cresswell, 2015). In the case of this study, participants were selected if they were high school teachers in New Zealand who taught subject English for the majority of the time (i.e. >50%) within their timetable (i.e. they may also have taught another subject, but English was their primary focus). They also needed to be teaching at least two NCEA classes, owing to this study's focus on NCEA. There were no restrictions on factors such as school type (e.g. public, integrated etc.), years of service or training type, however, as part of the sampling process, there was a focus on getting participants from a range of both high and low decile schools, as part of this study's focus on comparing teachers from these two contexts. If participants met these criteria they were included in the study. Eight participants were recruited in total. This number was selected so that there was the opportunity to compare a number of high and low decile school teachers, while still ensuring the study was manageable given its relatively small scope and timeframe.

To recruit teachers a request to participate was sent out to the English Online listserv, and a Facebook page used by English teachers in New Zealand called 'NZ English Teachers' (see Appendix A). The listserv is a government-run email forum for English teachers to discuss all matters related to teaching English in New Zealand, and the Facebook page operates in a similar, though less formal, capacity. This request generated a large number of responses. The first eight

participants who met the above criteria were selected. The participants and their schools can be characterised as follows:

Name (Pseudonym)	School Decile	Details about school
Abby	2	- large urban school - majority Pasifika student body
Sally	2	- small urban school - majority Pasifika student body
David	3	- medium-sized urban school - student body fairly evenly split between Māori, Pasifika & Pākehā
Katherine	4	- small semi-rural school - majority Māori student body
Ros	7	- medium-sized semi-rural school - majority Pākehā student body
Sarah	9	- large urban school - majority Pākehā student body
Judith	9	- large urban school - majority Pākehā student body
Heather	10	- medium-sized urban school - majority Pākehā student body

Once participants were recruited, hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted with each one (see Appendix D for questions). These interviews were recorded with voice recording software on the researcher's computer. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed the researcher to maintain a focus on matters directly related to the research topic, while

giving participants scope to share their thoughts in an open-ended fashion (Barriball & While, 1994; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Allowing participants to speak at greater length and have more control over the conversation can allow them to share insights or perspectives that may not be gained from a stricter line of questioning (Johnson & Chirstensen, 2014). These interviews were always conducted after school, either in a private room at the participant's school, or via the videoconferencing software Zoom if the participant did not live in the Wellington region. The use of these spaces was intended to make the participant feel comfortable, and to maintain their confidentiality (as discussed further below in the section ethical considerations).

Data Coding & Analysis

Once all of the data was gathered, it was transcribed by the researcher. Transcription can be a difficult process, because it is difficult to translate the dynamic aspects of a conversation into words (Scheurich, 1995). In an attempt to capture some of the qualities of the conversations that were not able to be captured with a transcription of just the words spoken, this study followed Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) in noting down a number of other features of the conversation in the transcription document. These included, among other aspects, when the participant significantly varied their tone, volume, pitch, pace and use of pause, as these all have significant impact on meaning. These were noted through the use of square brackets.

Once transcription was completed, inductive thematic coding was then used to develop themes. Inductive coding involves a 'bottom up' approach to code generation where codes are generated largely with reference to the data itself, as opposed to deductive or theoretical coding, where data is coded with reference to "a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.83; Johnson & Chirstensen, 2014). This study is relatively theory-laden, something which would have made the development of a codebook of *a priori* codes, and therefore a deductive analysis, possible. However, the generation of codes inductively was chosen in order to first build a robust picture which was as close as possible to participants' 'natural' or 'uninhibited' views, bearing in mind that the purpose of this study still inevitably shaped this process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theory was then only brought in once themes had emerged, so that the theory was used to discuss participants' views as represented in the coded data, rather than the theory playing a part in shaping the coding itself.

The coding process itself largely followed Bryman (2008) but also drew on Braun & Clarke (2006) and Berg (2007). Bryman (2008) outlines four stages in the coding process which were broadly followed here. (1): an first reading where initial trends or categories are noted down, (2): a second reading where initial codes are identified and more detailed annotations are made, (3): a third, detailed reading where you systematically code the text, eliminate similar codes and begin to think of broader thematic groupings, and finally (4): a stage where you develop broader themes, and begin to link codes and themes to research literature and theoretical material. This process was iterative in that sometimes some steps were repeated multiple times, or an earlier step was returned to if it appeared that initial codes were not fitting in well with later development of themes, for example. When moving from text to text in the coding process, constant comparison was used as a technique (Glaser, 1965). This involved ensuring that emerging codes are always being compared to existing codes to see whether new data captures similar trends to previous data, or whether new codes need to be generated to accommodate new previously unseen phenomena. When developing themes, several different thematic groupings were tried out before settling on the final themes, as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Finally, in the presentation of the data below in the findings section, the reporting of major themes has been clearly separated out from the discussion and interpretation of those themes, so that the difference between the views of participants and my interpretation of those views is clear (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). So that the report is easy to follow, three meta-themes are presented, with a number of themes under each meta-theme (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In laying out the themes, extended quotes from participants have been favoured, as opposed to smaller quotes enmeshed within larger tracts of analysis. This is because such an approach foregrounds the voices of participants, “preserving their original richness” (Holliday, 2007, p. 107) and allows readers to judge for themselves the interpretations of the quotes, and therefore assess whether the interpretations attached to them are correct (Lichtman, 2006). Finally, when it comes to interpreting the data in the discussion sections, I have broadly followed Cresswell (2015) in focusing on four main interpretive acts: summarising findings, offering theoretically informed reflections, making comparisons to the extant literature on the topic, and suggesting limitations of the data and thus suggestions for future research. Cresswell’s approach allows the interpretation and discussion of the findings to be part of a productive dialogue with the first half of the thesis (which of course has laid out the literature, theory and so on), while at the same time pointing towards future gaps which need to be filled.

Ethical Considerations

This study was guided by the ethical guidelines of the New Zealand Association of Research in Education (NZARE, 2010) and was granted approval by the university's human ethics committee. The most important principle in conducting ethical research is often considered to be nonmaleficence, otherwise known as doing no harm (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; NZARE, 2010). Given the nature of this study, there was essentially no chance of physical harm, and little chance of psychological harm, given that participants were only asked to talk about daily practices and decision making. Plans were made to move the conversation to a different area or pause interviews if participants became uncomfortable at all during the process, however, this did not end up being necessary.

Harm was also avoided in a number of other ways. Firstly, participants gave active, informed consent before participating in the research process. Active, informed consent involves participants signing a consent form consenting to take part, with full knowledge of "why the research is being undertaken, what it involves, how it will be reported, and the extent of public availability" (NZARE, 2010, p. 6). This information on the research was provided through a participant information sheet (Appendix B) and the consent form itself (Appendix C). The right to withdraw was also maintained, and this was both stated on the consent form, and discussed with participants in neutral terms (there was no attempt to persuade them to waive this right, for example), as is recommended (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The ability for participants to feel they were able to act freely in a broader sense when deciding to participate was maintained by ensuring that participants were not in a relationship of any kind with the researcher (e.g. colleague, employee, romantic partner and so on). This ensured that the researcher could not coerce the participants by way of bringing the dynamics of their relationship into the process of participating in the research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The opportunity for coercion was also removed by meeting either at the participant's school after classes had finished for the day, or over video conferencing software, rather than in a space known and/or comfortable only to the researcher.

Finally, the potential for harm was avoided by maintaining confidentiality. Only the researcher and the supervisor knew the identity of the participants, and only the researcher and supervisor dealt with the identifiable data. As soon as all the data was transcribed, it was stored in an unidentified form (i.e. without participant names attached) in a secure location (on a USB stick in the researcher's home, in a place where no one else had access) (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; NZARE, 2010). To further ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this

thesis, and the information given about each participant above is general enough that a participant could not be identified on the basis of that information. Overall, these steps ensured that the principle of nonmaleficence was upheld.

Part III: Findings & Discussion

Chapter Five: Findings

This chapter sets out the main themes found across the data gathered for this study. These are grouped under three meta-themes: student preferences & position, NCEA, and new perspectives & understanding the discipline. Each of these meta-themes is then considered with reference to a number of sub-themes. These meta-themes and sub-themes are discussed in order of their prevalence in the data, unless otherwise noted. The picture that ultimately emerges is that consideration of a student's personal interests and/or needs, either actual or inferred, dominates text selection practices. However, this is seen to be for many different reasons, from the more instrumentalist drive towards improving assessment results, through to attempts to use student engagement to connect students with texts or ideas which initially lie outside their interest. NCEA is also shown to be a significant factor, though not as significant as student engagement. Finally, a minority of participants in this study considered other factors, including the possibility of texts exposing students to key disciplinary ideas or concepts in English, as motivating factors in text selection. However, around half of the participants in this study either did not consider or actively dismissed considerations such as these, and even those who did consider them frequently found they struggled to act on them due to the constraints of NCEA. Importantly, very few significant differences were found between high and low decile schools when it came to text selection practices. At times lower decile teachers were more concerned about the difficulty of a text, both in terms of its language and the contextual understanding needed to interpret it. However, this was the only noticeable difference between the low decile and higher decile teachers included in this study, indicating that teachers' personal beliefs about content selection, rather than the context they were in, were the primary factor driving teacher decision making.

After outlining each metatheme, a discussion section will be included which places the themes in the context of the New Curriculum and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, and considers the data from this thesis's modified social realist perspective. Ultimately, it will be argued that teacher decision making is very much in-line the discursive-space provided by the New Curriculum, and that teachers rarely think about how to provide access to 'powerful content' in the sense discussed in Chapter Three.

Student Preferences & Position

“The text just has to be accessible to our young people, [pause] um, [pause] whether it’s through the message it tells, through the language that’s used, through the length of the text that we consider, as long as it’s accessible and meaningful to them, if it relates, then it’s a text worth teaching, [pause] yeah” (David)

‘Starting with the student’ dominated the reasons for selecting particular texts across nearly all participants in this study. All participants, when initially asked how they went about text selection, would open with some version of phrases like “the main thing I think about... is, can they relate to it?” (Abby) or “the first thing I do is look at the class and try to have some idea of who I’m dealing with, so I’ve got some notion of what those kids might be familiar with or interested in” (Judith). However, when prompted to discuss why they prioritised what I will call the student’s positionality in this way, a variety of slightly different motivations emerged, which varied from more instrumentalist concerns (if students are interested they will potentially do better in assessments), to concerns with students’ academic ability, in particular their reading level. I will explore four sub-themes in turn.

Engagement and Student Choice as Necessary for Learning

Perhaps surprisingly, the major reason that emerged for wanting to “meet the student where they are at” (Abby) was an inherent belief that the only meaningful learning which can occur is that which emerges out of a genuine interest on behalf of the learner. When asked why they wanted to make text choices based on student interests, participants would make comments like the following:

“I believe learning, true learning, only happens when the learning is meaningful and relevant to the learner, and so if you are not engaged... what that usually results in is that you are not seeing how what you’re learning is relevant to you.” (Sally)

“Well they always say that when you’re dealing with kids, the most important thing is relationships. They say you should have a relationship with the teacher, and only then are you going to learn. It’s the same relationship that has to exist between the student and the thing they’re studying. They have to have a relationship with it... I think if we choose texts right, then we give a kid a

relationship with something. And that has to be positive for their learning, because they do start to go actually reading has meaning and actually I can understand and I can interpret and I can move forward and I can relate.” (Katherine)

“If we, one of the things, the big big big big big deal, is engagement. If you haven’t got engagement, they’re not going to buy in. Five might, but 30 are not, are they. And you are sitting there bashing your head against a brick wall, I think, if you were saying we’re all going to look at this book and it’s going to appeal to everybody, because it isn’t. And you need that buy in for learning to happen.” (Heather)

The idea that students being immediately interested is a prerequisite for learning was the primary justification for prioritising student interests given by five of the eight respondents, with no discernable difference in response between high and low decile school teachers (the teachers quoted above represent decile 2, 4 and 10 schools respectively).

Furthermore, the idea that students must personally connect with a text leads to the belief that texts which may have other values, but which do not generate an instant personal connection for students, are not considered suitable to teach. For example, Sarah, talking about what kinds of texts she would not teach, asserted:

“Jane Eyre for example, like, I love that book, but I would never ever teach it, because what possible connection could kids from New Zealand draw with that character, and you could work really hard to maybe try and make them see that, but even I don’t have that connection to Jane Eyre, and I really like the book.”

This comment, other examples of which will be discussed below, opens up a peculiar space in which teachers acknowledge the potential value of a text through their own assertion of its worthiness to them, yet simultaneously reject its value for the classroom because it will, it is believed, lack immediate appeal to the students in front of them. It may well be true that *Jane Eyre* would be a challenging read for teenagers unfamiliar with the context of Brontë’s world and not accustomed to the length of a Victorian novel. Perhaps it would be too challenging to introduce into a New Zealand secondary classroom in the present day. However, this comment reveals a broader belief that anything too far beyond the ken of students ought to be immediately discounted, even if the teacher themselves recognises such a text as having merit.

Student Interest Leads to Improved NCEA Performance

The view that student engagement must drive decision making because it will generate better performance in NCEA was also prevalent in participants' responses, though not as prominent as the idea that student engagement is simply a necessary prerequisite to learning, with only three participants directly drawing a link between engagement and NCEA success. This is not to be confused, however, with the larger effect of NCEA in dictating teacher decision making, which will be addressed separately below.

When participants made this argument, it generally involved arguing that if a text was actually interesting to a student, then they would read it, and if they read it, they would know it better and thus be more likely to either complete assessments on it, or write in a more informed manner:

"I think students actually being interested is the most important thing because of engagement first and foremost, because if the kids don't engage with the text then like, [pause] we have to think about like, [pause] student outcomes and we have to think about like, our results especially at senior school, and if they don't relate to the text, especially when it's an extended written text, then they're just going to disengage and not read it and then they have a much more difficult time writing about that." (Abby)

The following comment is made in relation to the participant being asked why she lets students vote on the class text:

"It's engagement. I'm running on the assumption that if that's the one they choose then they're more likely to finish it and then to write well on it." (Sarah)

These comments on the need for engagement because it can lead to NCEA success also reveal that, just as for the teachers who simply care about student interest, NCEA English assessments are also fairly ambivalent about the quality of a text. Although this will be addressed more fully in the section below looking at the influence of NCEA, and again in the discussion section, we can begin to see here that the fact that NCEA allows any text to be taught means that teachers can be inclined towards picking more immediately engaging or relevant texts, because these will be the easiest for students to write about, and so will likely lead to higher success rates.

Student Interest Offers a Path to Expand Student Horizons

In a small number of cases, participants made more subtle, and less instrumentalist arguments about attempting to connect with student interests that did not simply assert that engagement = learning, or engagement = achievement. Instead, these participants argued that while engagement could achieve the aims discussed above, it could also be used as a starting point or “hook” (Heather) to then lead students on to other content which they would perhaps not have considered engaging with. This case was made most passionately by Heather, who opted to rarely do whole class texts, and instead usually attempted to individually match students with books that they would connect with, arguing that “you have to start with something they like and then you lead on from there”. She offers the example of initially engaging a student based on their interest in motor sports, but then using this in an attempt to support the student to read about the more complex topic of psychological motivation:

“If you’re looking at something along the lines of, one of the kids is into racing cars, you know, that sort of thing, so you look at, [pause] I don’t know, MacLaren, famous racing whatever, and then you can get them looking at what it actually takes mentally and psychologically to make a racing driver, well how do you find out about that, well that’s another text that you kind of go and pursue, and you go on from there...”

While the example may not be the most compelling, it does offer a situation where student interests are not being catered for simply because they have an immediate and apparent benefit (e.g. learning is occurring or students are getting higher examination grades), but because they may lead students towards ideas and perspectives they have not previously considered.

A similar example of engaging with student interests to think about how to expand their horizons is offered by Ros, who discusses how she changed what she was going to teach after engaging with her class:

“...last year with my Y12s, I was thinking I was going to stick with status quo, but then I discovered amongst the discussion of my class at the beginning of the year that they were much more intellectually engaged with the political context... so I ended up changing my text to something that would provoke discussion in a meaningful way. Yeah, so I ended up changing from Montana 1948, and I ended up changing over to Handmaid's Tale. It was just the nature of the discussion that they enjoyed having, and also the feedback that I got from them was that they were tired of looking at like racism as a broad idea and they wanted something that was a little bit more gritty and challenging, uh, yeah.”

This example offers a case where the teacher is still thinking first and foremost about what her students might be interested in. However, instead of attempting to find something immediately relevant to their context and relatively simple, she is substituting *Montana 1948*, a text targeted to young adults, with *Handmaid's Tale*, which is longer, more complex and arguably part of the emerging canon. *Handmaid's Tale* is typically taught at NCEA Level 3 (NZQA, 2015), so using it with year 12 students represents an opportunity to extend them. This is therefore a case where student interests are being leveraged to potentially stretch and challenge students, at least in one sense.

Texts Must be Judged Against Students' Academic Ability

Finally, many participants argued that a student's academic ability must be taken into consideration when selecting a text. This theme was more prominent than the above one about expanding horizons, but has been placed at the end of this section as it sits slightly to the side of the other three sub-themes, which are all more about student interest. Both high and low decile school teachers made reference to academic ability, but in a rare difference between the two groups, low decile teachers were overall more concerned with this, saying things like:

"I would prefer to teach a novel, but they're very complex and if the students don't have that culture of reading it's going to be really hard to have, well, they won't have the stamina to handle the novel, and then the novel really does fall over, so that's why we always resort to short stories, yeah." (David)

"I have talked to people who are doing like Raymond Carver short stories and all these things that I really like and I'm like yeah those would be so cool for Y13s, but when looking at my class and seeing that well maybe only 5 or 6 of them are actually quite academic, it needs to be something a little bit more simplistic." (Abby)

Comments like this reveal that assessing a student's academic ability (often figured in terms of reading stamina or reading ability) appears to have a significant effect on what teachers choose to teach, with low decile teachers in this study typically opting for shorter and more simple texts for their students. High decile teachers were still concerned with the academic abilities of their students when making text selection choices, but reference to this typically only came up in

relation to students' ability to access older, much more challenging texts. In the following quotes, the participants are talking about doing Shakespeare with a higher streamed class, but not with a lower one:

"It was all ah, Shakespeare, yes yes yes, here we are, Y13, that's pretty cool, da da da da da, [pause] um, without, because we were, [pause] we run a couple of tier English classes as well, I'd never try it with the other tier, because it's not going to fly necessarily." (Heather)

"I probably won't touch any Shakespeare this year with my Y11 class. It would blow their minds a bit too much." (Ros)

Higher decile teachers also made similar comments about texts like *Great Gatsby* (Sarah) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Judith), noting that the challenging nature of texts like this put them off using them.

This difference between low decile and high decile schools, with high decile school teachers tending to sometimes avoid canonical or historical texts, while low decile teachers may avoid novels altogether, or even more challenging mid-century short stories, due to students' academic ability, marks one of the few differences between high and low decile teachers seen in this data set. However, in the final metatheme below, counter-examples will be offered where low decile teachers also think about how they can use texts in their classrooms which will challenge and extend their students academically, instead of just align with their perceived academic level.

Discussion

This clear emphasis on student preference and interest as the primary determining factor in text selection aligns strongly with the constructivist impulse of the New Curriculum (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). This belief, that students must like what they are learning and have a meaningful connection to it, is a core component of constructivist pedagogy, something which McPhail (2016) argues has reached a stage of "doxic acceptance" (p. 298) in New Zealand schools. This data seems to corroborate McPhail's conclusion in this regard. This data also clearly aligns with that reported in the literature review above, where Hubbard (2017), Ormond (2017, 2019) and McPhail (2013) all reported empirical studies which showed that student interests and preferences were a significant factor in determining what content was selected by teachers in senior secondary classrooms.

This belief, that students being interested leads to engagement, and engagement leads to learning, is also revealing in that the participants quoted here do not have a particular concern (at least in the moment they were making these statements) with *what* students are learning; it is simply good, from their point of view, that some kind of 'learning' is occurring. This arguably reveals what the social realist Moore (2013) calls "a drift towards relativism" (p.335) about whether any text might be said to be better or more valuable to study than any other (relativism being absolutely central to constructivism). This all lines up strongly with Biesta's (2010) concern regarding "learnification", i.e., the issue that in many cases in schools, teachers are more concerned with asking "whether" students are learning rather than asking "what" they are learning (p.3). The question of what might be powerful, important or useful for the student to encounter is not present here (cf. Yates, 2017b).

It is important to acknowledge that in the modified social realist position of this thesis, the position of the student *does* need to be taken into consideration when making content selection decisions, as in subject English, the positionality of the student can affect the meaning, and therefore power, of a text. It is not simply the case that there is an externally agreed upon list of texts that can be implemented in schools which will automatically ensure students have 'powerful content' in front of them (although it is true that reference to external guidance from people like university academics is helpful). Instead, as Deng (2018) writes, educators need to "employ, as a point of departure, a vision of education centred on the cultivation of human powers and dispositions" (p. 378). This involves thinking of a "meaningful encounter between content and student" (Deng, 2018, p. 380), where an educator thinks deeply about who the student is, and then matches this with a consideration of what powers and dispositions they want them to acquire. Considering these two questions hand in hand will then lead them to a decision about what content might be suitable.

In the case of the teachers discussed here however, this detailed consideration of the interplay between student and content is not occurring. Here only the consideration of the student, and in particular what is engaging or interesting to them is occurring, and not the consideration of what one might want to cultivate in students through exposure to particular content. As long as 'learning' is happening, that is enough, and as Biesta (2012) writes, "learning is empty with regard to... direction" (p. 38), it does not involve asking why, and for what purpose, something is being learnt. Instead, teachers in this study largely just wanted to know as Heather notes, "works for them [students]":

“But if you are prepared to, you know, to keep an ever open mind... if you’re prepared to do that, I think you end up tailoring an individual kind of a curriculum that actually works for particular kids. Like [pause] um, you know some kids are really into like, [pause] the autobiographical stuff like Raffa or Raf, or just, Raffa, the tennis player you know and the um, [pause] the All Black ones and the Lance Armstrong book, you know those kinds of things... so that’s what works for them, you need to do what works for them.” (Heather)

This vision of teaching, where teachers are focused on only selecting those texts which are “not going to be kind of like way out and difficult to kind of like imagine” (Heather) for students, risks being deeply limiting for these students. Rather than helping them to either “transcend” (Young, 2013, p. 118) their immediate reality, or reimagine it in a new light (Green, 2009), or acquire some powerful knowledge like the ‘knowledge about literature’ or ‘knowledge of literary concepts’ discussed in the theoretical section above, it runs the risk of simply trapping students within their own worlds and perspectives, with no points of reference which will allow them to develop broader, or different, understandings of the world.

It is true that occasionally in the data offered above, we can see teachers striving for more of a middle-ground between the position of the student and the power particular content may hold. Consider Ros latching on to her students’ interest in politics, and choosing to develop on this interest by exposing them to a challenging, well-regarded text in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or even Heather thinking about how to use a student’s interest in racing cars to help them to think more about psychological motivation. In both of these cases, these teachers appear to be thinking more about the broader personal development of their students, rather than just the immediate question of whether they are ‘learning something’. There will be more examples of this kind of thinking discussed in the final metatheme below, though overall, they are few and far between, something that is worrying from the modified social realist perspective.

Finally, we begin to see in this section the tension between the progressivist impulse and the neoliberal, instrumentalist impulse at the heart of the New Curriculum, as discussed in Chapter One. While some teachers here adopt more classically child-centred, progressive reasons for putting student engagement at the heart of their practice, such as engaging them in learning for learning’s sake, others are clearly more concerned with the more instrumentalist goals of assessment results. In the way that student interest is prioritised by some teachers because “we have to think about like, student outcomes and we have to think about like, our results especially at senior school” (Abby), we can see how the openness and autonomy offered by the New Curriculum, intended to offer great freedom to students and teachers, can actually lead to a more restrictive model of education. This is a model which, contrary to its goals, narrows students’

exposure to challenging and powerful content as those texts that are “easiest” for the assessment system are put to the fore. This issue at the heart of NCEA’s apparent openness and flexibility will be explored in the next section, to which we now turn.

NCEA

“Do we think about exposing them to different perspectives on the world? That’s something we don’t really take into consideration when we’re selecting the text like, [pause] the perspectives, like, [pause] we’re looking at how well can we teach it, how long will the kids stay engaged with it, and whether it will boost the marks up for whatever level they’re doing the text at, and that’s where I think that NCEA sort of like, has its thumb on us as teachers.” (David)

NCEA has a significant effect on text selection, however, in line with the most significant previous study on this topic (Hubbard, 2017), this data set shows it having less influence than the kinds of personal beliefs of teachers discussed above. In their responses, participants in this study typically foregrounded personal beliefs about learning and relevance before discussing NCEA, and tended to give less weight to NCEA when comparing it with other factors. As I will discuss, this may well be because NCEA allows teachers such a substantial degree of freedom that they are able to foreground their personal teaching philosophies when choosing texts to teach rather than focusing first and foremost on assessment requirements. This is certainly an idea that emerges in some of the comments made by participants in this study, with many saying things like “NCEA has the potential for us to be so flexible” (Sally). Due to the freedom and flexibility inherent in NCEA, a number of teachers initially claimed in interviews that NCEA “doesn’t at all” (Heather) impact on their text selection process. However, after further questioning, all teachers eventually identified a range of ways in which NCEA shapes their practices. The influences of NCEA were diverse, and sometimes contradictory. For example, as will be discussed below, some participants claimed NCEA’s influence led them to using perhaps more difficult texts than they otherwise would have, while other participants indicated the reverse was true. There were no significant differences between high and low decile schools when it came to the influence of NCEA, again suggesting that teacher’s personal views, rather than their context, shaped decision making.

Influence of Texts' Previous Success in NCEA

Five of the eight participants gave some consideration to a text's past success in NCEA assessments. This makes it perhaps the most prominent theme in this section, in terms of the number of participants mentioning it. However, the degree of significance participants attributed to a text's historical success varied. Some participants mentioned this in passing. For example, Sarah gave an example of her selecting a text (in this case *Lord of the Flies*) in part because a colleague had told her "oh, this text works really well, you should do that" and she has subsequently continued teaching it because "it's so good to write on". Other teachers appeared to give more weight to historical success in assessments, as in this example from Ros, where she talked about their recent department review of texts:

"Yeah, so what we did was we brought all of our senior texts off the shelves, as well as any books that we were looking at purchasing, um, [pause] and we went okay, where do these actually fit in terms of what the curriculum document says. And then we had a look at success, like, historical success with them. Or lack of success. And then we rejigged a few of them to where we thought they were better pitched. And some we got rid off completely. We were like 'nah'."

Here, along with considering their curriculum levels (which is what is being referred to in the discussion of where they "fit in" with the curriculum document), one of the rare references to the NZC in this data set, success or otherwise in assessment appears to be a primary driver of whether or not a text is chosen. While some teachers either did not mention historic success as a factor, or in one case stated it was not an influence (Heather), it is clear that 'what works in NCEA assessments' is a key factor driving text selection in many cases. This then leads on to the very important question of what kinds of texts NCEA assessments incentivise - are they encouraging the teaching of complex, interesting, powerful texts, or do they offer different incentives?

NCEA Means Texts Need to be Simple and Few in Number

Five participants indicated that NCEA incentivised them to either choose simpler, more immediately engaging texts than they otherwise would have. The following two quotes involve teachers talking about staying away from more complex texts because of the fact that it is hard for students to perform as well in assessments using these texts:

“In the last few years I’ve taught things like Othello. It’s still a thing that relates, and yet the language barriers, the history barriers, the context barriers, exist in too strong a way for the kids to succeed in NCEA in the same way.” (Katherine)

“We’re reading the Handmaid’s Tale... and I didn’t think it would be such an issue for a Y13 academic English class, but it has been, that like, they, it needs to be a length that is manageable and it also needs to be written in a way that excites them. The Handmaid’s Tale is quite slow and like, it’s not so action-y, which hasn’t been so good... So, I think engagement is the thing, is why it needs to be relatable for the reasons that yeah, it needs to, we have to think about grades.” (Abby)

These quotes clearly reveal that with an assessment system that provides few guidelines around the kinds of texts that ought to be taught, there are clear incentives to not persevere with texts which, for example, have “language barriers”, “context barriers” and so on. It becomes preferable to offer more immediately accessible texts, even if students might have much to learn from overcoming these “barriers” and mastering more challenging content.

Some also indicated that NCEA encouraged them to choose to teach a reduced number of texts, even if students may have benefitted from exposure to a broader range of texts, from, for example, different genres, periods or geographic locations:

“I mean it is, and again, this kind of relates to NCEA, I would rather expose kids to far more texts, and do less about them. It’s like we could read different texts, and look at one dimension, look how it’s crafted, instead of studying one text to death you know, so you know it back to front for the NCEA exam, because I think that keeps things moving, and I think the more that you engage with a broader range of texts, the more that you understand you’re studying texts, as opposed to this book, you know.” (Judith)

...because again you are teaching it for assessment right, which is a bit shitty but it just is the case, [pause] um, [pause] so like if you want kids to get the most success out of it then you have to kind of explore all of those things in class and like when you do just that one text you can explore a lot of ideas around it.” (Abby)

There is nothing stopping students going into an NCEA exam and completing a comparative essay on two Shakespeare plays, or an analysis of the approaches of New Zealand versus Australian writers to the issue of colonisation, for example. However, when students are able to

complete assessments using just one text of any type (including just one poem), then teachers such as these two just quoted clearly feel driven to teach just one text in detail, so that students have the greatest chance of success in the examination, as opposed to having the opportunity to be exposed to a broad range of texts.

NCEA Means Texts Need to be Complex

In contrast with those participants who highlighted how NCEA had led them towards dropping, or looking to drop, more complex or ‘inaccessible’ texts from their programme, some participants highlighted how NCEA had actually stopped them from selecting overly simple texts and had directed them towards selecting those which had the “depth of ideas” (David) NCEA required. Returning to the example above given by Ros about choosing *Handmaid’s Tale* over *Montana 1948*, she discusses how she was partly incentivised to do this because of NCEA:

“I was asking will they be able to get that depth of response, um, and is there, well, look at something like Montana 1948, there’s lots of kind of cool author’s purpose and stuff you can dive into but with Atwood there was just so much more that they could sink their teeth into, so, gut instinct, it’s about me wanting my students to enjoy learning, but then there is that cloud at the back going results results results let’s get excellence let’s get excellence.”

Participants also sometimes mentioned how NCEA drove them away from teaching shorter texts, as in this quote from David:

“When I finished doing my first two years [of teaching], I actually realised that hang on, I’m getting more responsibilities, I need texts that I can quickly think from the top of my head and like can teach um, and that is, but I didn’t get the results that I wanted, because I ended up just relying on short texts rather than extended texts um, which are cool for the kids and was cool for me, but then I was looking at the depth of ideas like, yes short texts are awesome, but if the student isn’t a deep thinker I, yeah, they don’t really yeah, they don’t really produce what I knew that they were capable of. Now I’m looking ahead and I do want to include more extended texts.”

The drive to get to what Abby calls “that depth you need to get to be able to write at a merit-y excellence-y kind of level” clearly leads some teachers to sometimes prioritise slightly more complex texts, and avoid those which are short, overly simple, or, for example are “plot-driven” and have “paper-thin” characters (Judith).

The Particular Requirements of NCEA Assessments Shape Text Selection

The final, and perhaps more complex, influence of NCEA involves the way the particular assessment criteria/design shape text selection preferences. All participants in this study made some reference to this, though it was often oblique, and they typically did not weight these considerations as highly as others. Firstly, the types of exam questions tended to have an impact on what texts teachers chose. Sarah puts this most clearly:

“The text has to have all of the components that can come up in the exam question, it has to have setting, character, conflict, clear turning points, theme, you know.”

Abby offers an example of the types of exam questions influencing what she taught her Year 11 class:

“So, I guess it’s just finding a text that you can write about in terms of like what’s going to come up in the NCEA exam as well right, like if it’s like a big complicated text um, [pause] it’s not going to be a good one right like, Of Mice and Men’s got two characters, it’s, um, it’s got a really clear setting, it’s got a really clear message and if you can just pull out those things and like explore them lots and lots, then it’s really easy to write about.”

Both of these participants are referring to the fact that in English, NCEA questions typically ask students to talk about key aspects of texts such as theme, settling, character development and so on, and therefore, teachers are incentivised to choose texts which feature such aspects in ways which are easy to talk about. This means that, as Abby says, two characters, each with clear attributes, are easier to talk about than 10, and one clear setting is easier to deal with than a novel which moves through multiple different settings.

In addition to the way that the exam questions shape teacher practice, participants also discussed how particular assessment criteria shaped text selection. NCEA’s assessment criteria for English typically demand a “beyond the text link” for higher grades, particularly excellence. This link can take many forms, but may typically look like a student offering a personal response, or linking the text to issues in their own community or society. Katherine offers a clear example of how this focus in the NCEA assessment criteria has seen her prioritise texts which are more

immediately relevant to her students, rather than those that may be more removed from their world:

“NZQA with their exams, they have these keywords that the kids have to understand, they have to ‘personally relate’, they have to be ‘convincing’ in their understanding or they have to be ‘perceptive’. So they always need something relatively meaty... but taking things that are a little bit out of their cultural sphere or experience, well, their ability or attempts to relate to or respond to it can be really awful and really tokenistic, which is why the relatability of a text has to be factored in. So having a group of kids that are dealing with stress and anxiety, or have dependency in their families, and then giving them characters suffering those same issues, there’s no challenge for them to relate... I recognise that if they don’t see it as real enough, then they’re not going to be perceptive and convincing and they’re not going to get merits and excellences... It has to be relatively new and relevant.”

Similar concerns were raised by, among others, Abby, who discussed how she had avoided teaching *Slaughterhouse Five* because as it was largely dealing with a “historical society” and so students would not be able to “make links with our society so easily”.

Discussion

Overall, it is clear that NCEA has a significant effect on text selection, though its relevance clearly varies for different teachers. While most teachers included in this study are interested in knowing whether or not a text has been historically successful in NCEA, they have varying views on whether NCEA is driving them towards more simple texts or more complex texts: this is captured perfectly in the way that Abby discussed avoiding *Handmaid’s Tale* due to its complexity, whereas Ros discussed selecting it because of its complexity and the way it would therefore help students achieve the higher grades she wanted for them. Teachers are also clearly driven by the format of NCEA assessments, however, again, the effects of these can be diverse. Overall, no significant trends are able to be identified in this data set with regards to the influence of NCEA on teachers at schools of different decile ratings. Although one could see the *Handmaid’s Tale* example as one where a lower decile school teacher (Abby) is avoiding complexity while a higher decile school teacher (Ros) is embracing it, there are also examples of higher decile school teachers avoiding more complex texts in this data set (see high decile school teachers’ caution about teaching *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the previous section, for example), and of lower decile

teachers looking to teach complex texts such as Ibsen's *The Doll House* (discussed in the next section) meaning no meaningful conclusion can be drawn from this example alone.

From the modified social realist perspective of this thesis, NCEA largely seems to hinder, rather than help, students in accessing powerful content. It is clear that for a majority of teachers, NCEA's openness and flexibility drive teachers to more often than not seek more simple or immediately accessible texts for their classrooms, as long as they also line up with student interests, as discussed in the first section. It is interesting to note that participants in this research did identify that NCEA helped to identify a kind of 'minimum bar' for texts, and so did encourage David, for example, to substitute a novel for a short story, and was one factor involved in Ros choosing to extend her Year 12 students with *Handmaid's Tale*. However, there was no sense in the data that NCEA had this effect systemically, or regularly set a high bar for content. There was certainly no sense in which NCEA encouraged teachers to think about the power of particular texts and how they might help students development, in the sense that Deng (2018) and others advocate for.

It is also interesting to consider the effect NCEA has in reducing the quantity of texts taught, something previous studies of text selection have not considered (McKirdy, 2014; Hubbard, 2017). From the modified social realist perspective of this study, this presents a significant problem when it comes to students understanding the discipline of English literature by way of developing 'knowledge about literature' and 'knowledge of abstract literary concepts'. Judith's comment, that studying a variety of texts may help students to understand they are studying "texts" as opposed to "this book" starts to hint at the way in which NCEA, through incentivising the study of single texts in isolation, limits students' ability to develop a broad knowledge of literature and literary concepts needed to develop the "power or disposition" (Deng, 2018, p. 378) of being a confident and successful interpreter of literature. Ideally, students need to be exposed to a variety of key genres, authors, periods and aspects of literary form and style so that they have both the contextual information and conceptual grammar through which to interpret works of literature they subsequently encounter. This can take many forms: a rich understanding of key writers of the Māori renaissance may help students better interpret and understand contemporary Māori writers like Tina Makereti, for example, while an understanding of the concept of allegory is vital to understanding texts such as *The Crucible* or *The Wizard of Oz*. However, NCEA incentivises the study of a small range of texts, which are acceptable as long as they suit the kinds of generic, "decontextualised" (Fountain, 2008, p. 140) assessment tasks discussed in Chapter One. As Judith notes, NCEA promotes the idea of students thinking about whether "can identify 53 different quotes from this book, and analyse those for an assessment",

rather than developing “an inclination or a skill set, a way of seeing” by way of exposure to a broad and diverse range of literature.

In this sense, the findings of this section very much mirror those of Ormond (2017, 2019) in relation to history. Ormond found that NCEA had, in most cases, led to a narrowing of content offered to students; if they only needed to understand one period, or one event, for their NCEA history assessments, then they would often be exposed to not much more than this. Ormond argues that open-ended curricula and assessments paradoxically led not to students learning about a broader range of history, but rather they were likely to be exposed to less, and what they did learn about was more likely to be more strongly tied to students’ immediate interests. The same pattern seems to emerge here, with NCEA English mostly disincentivising teachers from exposing students to a broad range of material, and focusing on texts that they are more immediately interested in. In this sense, this data stands somewhat opposed to McPhail’s (2013) findings that all teachers in his study were at least attempting to strike a balance between breadth and depth, and content immediately relevant to students and that beyond their immediate knowledge. However, there are some cases where at least some teachers are considering the potential benefits of exposing students to material beyond their line of sight, and this is discussed in the final section below.

New Perspectives and Understanding the Discipline

“They’re never going to read these things themselves, like, nobody’s ever going to read, pick up the Handmaid’s Tale, nobody’s ever going to pick up of Mice and Men and read it, I think that it’s good to open their eyes to, well, I don’t know.” (Abby)

“You don’t need like a classic outdated, I mean like, i’m not saying, I’m not talking down on those texts, I personally have not read Lord of the Flies, just the title is like nah, why would I want to read about flies, and if it’s not about flies I’m like, it’s not engaging me through the title, so I’m not going to read it. I mean yeah... these are texts that you *should* be able to explore the key things we need to know about our discipline, but I was like actually you can read anything and still get the same message, like still get the same learning.” (David)

Although all teachers placed the majority of their emphasis on the themes identified above (student positionality and NCEA), many teachers also offered their thoughts on the way texts they selected might be able to help students engage with the discipline of English literature more

broadly, or with ideas and concepts which otherwise took students beyond their immediate reality. This was a surprise, as the previous literature both in New Zealand and internationally reviewed above had not identified this as a trend. In what follows, two key areas will be addressed: the ability of texts to expose students to new and potentially powerful themes and perspectives, and the ability of texts to help students understand literary traditions. Finally, the comments of those who asserted that engaging with complex texts, and/or texts with historical value in the discipline, was not valuable are surveyed. Fascinatingly, no significant differences were found between high and low decile schools when it came to this meta-theme.

Exploring New Themes & Perspectives

In contrast with the first major metatheme about connecting a text with a student's positionality, at times participants in this study also discussed how texts could take students beyond their immediate reality. Often participants would talk about this desire at the same time as talking about how texts needed to 'connect' and 'be relevant', indicating that teachers were sometimes either not clear about whether they wanted to pursue one route or the other, or revealing how at various times, teachers sought to attempt to include both texts immediately relevant to a student's situation, and those which could expand student horizons. With regards to the latter option, participants mentioned the power of exposing students to some idea or experience they hadn't previously understood, of "being able to see the world from someone else's perspective" (David):

"If they read Jasper Jones... that's something they get out of it, the discussion of the whole indigenous situation in Australia, those experiences, like something they didn't know before, so is there something they can get out of it other than 'this quote shows this'." (Sarah)

Here, Heather talks about exposing her largely Pākehā student body to Pasifika texts:

"You can consider different points of view if you, [pause] say for example if we've got this latent racism lurking in NZ, and we have, if we have a situation where um, we say to kids okay, here, let's have a look at some texts through maybe a colonial lens, let's look at that, have a look at you know, some New Zealand texts or maybe we have a look at some Pasifika poems, and well, if you looked at that sort of thing and you exposed them to a variety of texts like that, then you are encouraging them to get a greater understanding of the world."

Understanding Literary Traditions

Four teachers specifically made reference to selecting texts in order for students to “have some awareness” (Judith) of the literary past. Typically, this was framed in terms of students being better able to “understand where we are now” (Sally):

“Like, if we can start to see ourselves, and again for me it’s all about the connections, where we are today the things we do today, what we’re learning today matters because we are standing on the shoulders of giants, and your role if you’re going to be a participating and contributing member of this society is you’re going to be adding to the world in some way, and someone else is now going to stand on your shoulders. So, if we’re learning something today, why, where did that first come from? Where did this whole stuff start?” (Sally)

Participants typically framed the benefit of engaging with this literary past in two ways. The first was the idea that if students knew canonical texts, they could understand and better make sense of modern texts by using the canon as a point of reference. This is in line with the argument about the importance of ‘knowledge about literature’ discussed above. Sarah offers an example of where this knowledge might be useful:

“...or even being able to understand other references that are in other texts, like I was trying to explain to my students that Jasper Jones [a modern young adult novel] is like a modern day Mockingbird, and they were like a what? And I was like well, I need to explain that! So if you have that base knowledge of literature, then that’s helpful, it can allow them to access and better understand other texts.”

Secondly, participants talked about how particular texts could be used to understand key literary ideas or representations. For example, Sally used Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* to help students better understand the history of the way females have been represented in literature when they were looking at *The Great Gatsby*. Similarly, Ros offers some examples of department wide approaches to teaching texts so that students are able to understand key content knowledge (mythology) needed to access other texts, or key generic conventions (in this case those related to dystopia and satire):

“...at Y9 where we’ve bought a class set of the mythology anthology... because we’ve noticed that as students were getting up through senior school they weren’t picking up on the references

to the myths and greek myths and legends, um, likewise at, well, dystopia has been the thing lately, so we've started to bring in things like Animal Farm at Y10, to help start teaching the allegory and symbols and elements of dystopia and, and, political satire and context and whatnot. So that way they're more prepared or familiar with um, [pause] for example, at, ah, Y12 one of my colleagues teaches 1984, so just trying to bridge through the year levels rather than just pegging things at one year level, so how can we build the skills early, so it's not as difficult for students to access the texts later on."

These moments are relatively rare in participant responses: student engagement and NCEA dominated teacher motivations to a much greater extent. It is worth noting too that even when participants in this study wanted to teach a text so that students could understand the literary past, or key literary ideas, more clearly, the incentives discussed above that pulled teachers towards teaching less complex, more relatable texts were always in play. Judith for example, discussing how *To Kill a Mockingbird* might be a useful text for students to understand, noted that she likely would still not end up teaching it because "while *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a great book, Jesus Christ it's hard to get kids to read it... kids, even kids who are good readers, would really struggle with that".

The Lack of Value in Complexity & Canon

Despite the themes identified above, a number of participants were still dismissive of the value of exposing to students to challenging ideas or literary traditions beyond their initial frame of reference, particularly when it came to canonical texts:

"I wouldn't say um, that there is value in a canon. That there's a certain canon of literary texts and there has to be a certain, um, yeah, a high aesthetic quality? I mean, can you not get those in things like video games?" (Heather)

"I could put up a tapa cloth and we could talk about symbolism. I could pull like, you know, our assistant principal's scarf that she knitted and we could talk about symbolism. You don't need like a classic outdated, I mean like, i'm not saying, i'm not talking down on those texts, I personally have not read *Lord of the Flies*, just the title is like nah, why would I want to read about flies, and if it's not about flies i'm like, it's not engaging me through the title, so i'm not going to read it. I mean yeah, I know what you mean, it's like, but these are texts that you should be able to explore

the key things we need to know about our discipline, I was like actually can read anything and still get the same message, like still get the same learning.” (David)

Both of these comments return to the relativism at the heart of constructivist theories of learning discussed above. If no text is better to engage with than any other text (i.e. a video game is as rich aesthetically and as rewarding and useful to engage with as a novel), then engaging with the literary past is seen to be of limited value, especially if you lack any broader goal of inducting students into an academic discipline by way of acquiring knowledge about literature & literary concepts.

A similar view emerged with regards to language. Although no participants spoke against the value of encountering different kinds of language, a number were opposed to the idea that it was worthwhile for a student to be exposed to complex or challenging text:

“And then there’s the fundamental issue that a text must be at curriculum level 8 of the curriculum in order to be studied [at NCEA level three). Am I allowed to swear on this transcript? Because that’s bullshit [loud, emphatic tone]. You can take a picture book and analyse it at a university thesis, PhD level. No text is a single layered text, it’s your analysis of a text that is the issue.” (Sally)

“If you’re looking at Thomas the Tank Engine, looking at that in terms of as a reflection of the cultural and historical and social significance of the time it as written, it could stand as a text that actually showed you those things, and you could write a very, well, a thesis upon that, I feel, about those things and why they were there, you know, the role of women, misogyny, it’s hugely misogynist. But if the person can apply a critical kind of a response to that, and get those things out, they are employing critical skills, and that’s what matters.” (Heather).

This view, which emerged in a minority of cases, essentially held that English as a subject should be concerned solely with the complexity of interpretation, and that therefore there was no inherent value in students encountering a more complex text: any text is suitable to inquire into if all that is valued is what a student can say about it.

Discussion

At moments participants clearly sought to think about how texts could be used to expose students to a broader range of ideas and perspectives, and to allow them to begin to develop an

understanding of various aspects of subject English's parent discipline. In these instances, participants were thinking clearly about the different ways in which texts could be powerful. These included the more affective ability of a text to allow you to understand a different point of view, such as Heather exposing her students to Pasifika perspectives, to the more concrete acquisition of knowledge about literature and literary concepts one can gain from engaging with a text, such as Ros supporting her students to understand the genre of dystopia through reading *Animal Farm*. In this sense, we can see that there are clearly moments, however limited, when teachers are thinking about powerful content, and the ways in which content can lead to the broader development of a human being and their powers and dispositions (Deng, 2018). Heather's students are clearly developing a capacity to see things from different points of view (and a Pasifika point of view in particular), while Ros's students are developing the capacity to interpret future dystopian texts such as *1984* more adeptly.

These examples are also interesting to think about because they reveal how literature's power does have a "human context" (deng, 2018, p. 375), and this must be taken into account when deciding what content to select for a classroom in a way that makes subject English distinct from science and mathematics. For example, teaching decile 10, largely Pākehā students Pasifika texts they almost certainly would not pick up of their own accord is potentially a very powerful experience for these students, as these texts will likely bring them face to face with a worldview of perspective they have not encountered before, yet one that is vitally important to understand if they are to participate fully in New Zealand society. This is not to say that such texts would not be powerful for a classroom made up primarily of Pasifika students as well, just that this power would be different. This example therefore reinforces the fact that one must consider both the text and the student when choosing what to teach, rather than just privileging one or the other. It is also a good example of where the academy cannot be the final arbiter of what should be taught. Although academics may be able to support the selection of aesthetically rich Pasifika texts, including some which may have historical and literary significance (think for example of the influential work of Albert Wendt, which has a significant body of academic literature attached to it), they cannot determine exactly what kind of power such texts will have for particular groups of students. In this sense again, the academy may be a useful guide for a teacher, but they must also consider their own students and their world.

It is important to note too that this concern with 'powerful content' stood out in comparison to both previous studies on text selection in New Zealand: both McKirdy (2014) and Hubbard (2017) did not report their participants taking factors such as those just mentioned into consideration when making text selection decisions. The only study that could be said to align

with this is McPhail (2013), who noted how teachers in his study were interested in balancing “the canon and the kids” (p. 18), in their content selection decisions. Significantly however, McPhail reported that all teachers he surveyed strove for this balance, whereas teachers in this study were rarely interested in exposing students to canonical material, or material otherwise outside their initial frame of reference. The kinds of comments covered under this metatheme were few and far between in the data, and, perhaps perplexingly, often the participants who gave the above remarks were also the ones talking emphatically about prioritising a student’s personal interests and context above all else in the previous sections of this chapter.

Furthermore, even participants who valued these things also indicated that too often, the pressures of NCEA and student demands meant that these projects were sidelined. When talking about her teaching of Ibsen and the idea of exposing students to more of the literary past, Sally said “I would love to do more, I do really find myself feeling restricted by assessment deadlines”. She indicated that the constant pressures of NCEA to just get grades in, and good ones, meant that she was not able to prioritise the kinds of material she felt could be powerful for students: instead, NCEA demanded texts that could be done quickly and easily. In this sense, we can return back to Ormond’s (2017, 2019) conclusions, that even when teachers felt they would like to expose students to a broader range of material, or more challenging material, the openness of NCEA and the NZC leads to a paradoxical narrowness, where, in busy and time-pressured environments like schools, so often the minimum that is needed to be done is what is done. When the curriculum and assessment framework allows teachers to eschew more challenging, disciplinary learning in favour of content which might be easier or more immediately appealing, this study suggests that this eschewal is often the outcome. In order to move to an environment which incentivises teachers to make decisions which expose students to powerful content, changes need to be made to the policy architecture within which teachers make their decisions. This is what the final chapter will now turn to, after a summative discussion of these findings.

Chapter Six

Summative Discussion & Recommendations

This chapter first briefly summarises the conclusions which can be drawn from the data set analysed above. It then moves to look at three potential solutions which might help create more opportunities for students to encounter powerful content moving forward: a reform of teacher training and professional development, a return to a more prescriptive curriculum, and the development of much stronger guidelines within the curriculum and NCEA. The potential benefits and downsides of each of these solutions is assessed and a tentative path forward is outlined.

Summative Discussion

If there is one thing which stands out from the data above other than the themes as stated, it is the enormous breadth of (sometimes competing) motivations teachers have when selecting texts to bring into their classroom. So often, teachers like Sally will say that first and foremost they need to base their decision making on “who my learners are, what their interests are”. In one instance, Sally even talked about how she was developing a Year 13 programme where students will all be able to individually choose all their own texts, so that their own preferences were entirely driving the course. However, at the same time, Sally also talked about purposely teaching Henrik Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House* to her students, after they failed, in her view, to fully understand the character Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. Once she noticed that her students “genuinely hated” Daisy, she decided they needed to understand more about the constraints on women in the time period in question, and the ways in which women were portrayed by male authors. She describes how she “brought in the canon text” of Ibsen to contextualise the role Daisy plays in Fitzgerald’s novel, and as a result, students became much more understanding of Daisy, and developed a broader understanding of both the historical circumstances women lived in, and how women were depicted in literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

There is almost no possibility that, based on Sally’s description of her students, they would have individually chosen Ibsen’s play to study in the personalised Y13 programme she was

discussing. It took the deliberate act of the teacher to bring this text to the class, something which appeared to allow them to develop a much deeper understanding than they otherwise might have. Apparent incongruities like this in teacher decision making can be seen throughout this data set, and perhaps more than anything else speak to the complexity of the job of selecting texts to teach in a high-autonomy environment. Considering who the students are in front of you, what they might benefit in being exposed to, and all the subfactors within these considerations (e.g. text complexity, suitability for assessment, literary value and so on) is a challenging task.

With this complexity noted, however, we can still assert that from the modified social realist perspective of this thesis, teachers are by and large not thinking all that often about exposing students to powerful content in their classrooms. While there are occasional, isolated examples of teachers actively considering ways in which they can develop students through the exposure to different perspectives and voices, or how they can support students to gain the necessary knowledge about literature and knowledge of literary concepts to deftly navigate literary study, teachers are chiefly driven by other considerations. David puts it clearly when he says that, in his view, teachers “don’t really take into consideration” exposing students to “different perspectives”: instead, with each text they are focused on asking “how well can we teach it, how long the kids will stay engaged with it, and whether it will boost the marks up for whatever level [of NCEA] we’re doing it at”. These priorities (student engagement, NCEA success) have a corrosive impact on teacher decision making, because they direct attention away from fundamental questions of purpose: of why a particular text might be worth studying, and how it may enhance a student’s overall development.

One of the strongest arguments for the New Curriculum model that New Zealand so clearly subscribes to is that it liberates students from all having to engage with the same, static, canonical material, which in subject English consists largely of older books written by white men from England. However, what is not realised by proponents of the New Curriculum is that by moving rapidly to the other end of the curriculum spectrum and removing all prescribed content, students are trapped in a different, but nonetheless equally disadvantageous situation. In a system where, as McKirdy (2014) puts it, “there are no rules” (p. 48), teachers all too often become driven by short-term goals, just like David says. They focus on immediate interest on the part of the student, or a series of good NCEA grades for a particular assessment, rather than thinking richly and deeply about the kind of person they are helping to create, and what it might benefit them to be exposed to over, in the case of high school, five years of study.

Fascinatingly, this trend does not appear to be more prominent in low decile schools than in high decile ones. In this sense, the worry of Young (2014) and other social realists that students

of lower socio-economic status are more likely to miss out on powerful content is not realised in this dataset at least. Although low decile teachers appear slightly more concerned with the complexity of a text, and may choose texts which they feel are easier for their students to read, the fundamentals of their decision making essentially align with high decile teachers. When teachers, from either high or low decile schools, are opting to teach texts which are challenging, or which expose students to important and powerful material, they are doing this largely of their own volition. This is a concern, as it means the likelihood of New Zealand students currently having a rich and powerful learning experience in subject English is somewhat down to chance, and the whims of an individual teacher. At an extreme level, one student could easily go through high school never even encountering a novel, and constantly reading short texts from authors who share similar perspectives to them, while another could spend five years engaging with a rich variety of text types, genres and perspectives which would both broaden their mind and prepare them well to understand literature they encounter in the future, in either a formal (e.g. through university study) or informal setting. Given this is the case, the question then becomes that of how to develop an environment where teachers are significantly more incentivised to consider exposing students to powerful content; to opt to make that second student's experience the standard one. In what follows, three potential options will be put forward which could help ensure all students get access to powerful content.

Potential Paths Forward

Option One: A high-autonomy framework is retained, but teacher training, recruitment and professional development is done differently. This option would involve retaining the curriculum and assessment system as it is, while supporting teachers to consider more deeply how to put “human development” (Deng, 2018, p. 375) through access to powerful content at the centre of their decision making. Some participants in this study did talk about part of the reason they struggled to expose students to a wealth of literature was because they themselves lacked knowledge about it, or they felt that New Zealand English teachers as a whole did. Sally noted that she first realised the significant gaps in her knowledge of literature when she went on exchange during university to the University of Edinburgh:

I studied literature there for the year, and in that year there were a hundred texts in the canon list... I'd finished my entire study in New Zealand, I had already done a year and a half at university studying English literature, and out of the hundred texts on that list I'd only heard of

two people. And I just went: wowsas. Who, what are we doing? [emphatic tone, raised volume] We put so much emphasis on like, two to three people in New Zealand. And we miss the wealth of, wealth of literature, um, so for example for me people like um, Irving Washington, he is the father of the short story. Why don't we ever learn about him?... let's look at people who transformed the way we read...

Although this thesis has not actively sought to assess teachers' knowledge of English literature, comments such as this clearly indicate that a lack of knowledge of literature could be a key part of why teachers do not try to expose students to a broader range of literary texts, especially canonical ones. Therefore, although there is not space to outline a full alternative teacher training model here, re-imagining that training, including more specific entry requirements, may better support teachers in the long run to make decisions about text selection in their classrooms. As well as thinking about what literary knowledge teachers should have, such re-imagining may also need to think about helping teachers to think more carefully about the art of curriculum design through professional development, so that their decisions are not reactive, i.e. are not in response to immediate demands of assessment or student interests, but are more concerned with thinking about what kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions students might ideally have at the end of their studies.

Leaving the high-autonomy model in place and simply better supporting teachers to operate within it would likely be popular with teachers themselves: all teachers in this study stated they valued the autonomy the current policy settings offered them very highly, and would not like to see this sense of professional freedom reduced. It aligns well with those writing about text selection internationally, such as Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber (2006) who argue that further support, including from librarians and via professional development, is what is needed to support teachers to make high quality text selection decisions. Writing about Scotland's open-ended 'Curriculum for Excellence', which in many ways is very similar to New Zealand's curriculum, both Priestley, Robinson & Biesta (2012) and Smith (2019) share similar conclusions. They find, as Ormond (2017, 2019) has found in New Zealand, that this openness has led to a "narrow and fragmented syllabus in which pupil preference, teacher interests and the logistics of timetabling guide content selection" (Smith, 2019, p. 441). Their solution to this is to develop teachers professionally, through access to research literature, inter-school collaborations and other forms professional support, as well as instilling in teachers a greater capacity to critique structural aspects of the education system such as continual high-stakes assessment.

While all of this may be very welcome, such a solution does not necessarily realise that even if teachers are much more professionally knowledgeable, and even if they are able to push back to some extent on the pressures the system places on them, to some extent the curriculum and assessment framework will always create certain incentives which will drive teachers to act in certain ways. Therefore, even if teachers are better supported professionally, the policy framework which they operate in also needs to be considered.

Option Two: A return to a heavily prescribed curriculum. One possibility to deal with the potentially fragmented or limited range of texts students are exposed to in subject English in New Zealand at present is to remove the ability for teachers to act as “independent curriculum makers” (Ormond, 2017, p. 599) and return to a heavily prescribed text list, as is currently seen in many other countries (Grieg & Holloway, 2016; Holloway & Grieg, 2011; Stallworth, Gibbons & Fauber, 2006; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). There would be some clear benefits to such an approach. Namely, we could guarantee that all students would be exposed to texts which were satisfactorily challenging, that they would be exposed to texts which explored a variety of perspectives, and that they would come to know something of the literary past, and of core literary concepts by encountering them in certain set texts (take the case of Ros’s department effectively making *Animal Farm* compulsory in their school so that all students would understand key concepts such as satire and dystopia, for example).

However, the downsides to this approach are also obvious. As has already been discussed, literature must always to some extent derive its power in social context and from the positionality of the reader. Although we may turn to the academy for some guidance around which texts which have strong aesthetic value, and/or have significant value within literary history, it is not possible to generate a set list of texts which will be equally powerful for all students. It may be worthwhile for New Zealand to adopt a list of recommended texts for study, or a long list of prescribed texts from which teachers can make selections. These lists could be under regular review from an expert panel. However, ultimately teachers need some room to consider the contexts in which they are teaching in, and the students in front of them, as part of exposing them to powerful content: it cannot be the case that having all Year Nine students read *Midsummer Night’s Dream* between weeks 10-12 in the school year would be a workable solution.

Option Three: A curriculum and assessment system with much clearer guidelines about text selection. This final option sits in between the first two, seeking to outline a policy framework which still gives teachers some autonomy, and thus some ability to consider the students in front

of them when selecting which texts to teach, while also still ensuring that whatever they decide to offer is not too narrow or limited in scope. While still supporting a high degree of teacher autonomy, Judith, in her view, interestingly gestured toward this kind of solution, by using the New Zealand government's recent announcement that there will be compulsory topics in New Zealand history from 2022 to think through what something similar might look like in subject English:

I'm thinking you could do, you could do things in the curriculum in English in terms of saying, we have an expectation that some of the texts you are going to encounter are going to be New Zealand texts, or Pacific texts, and some are going to be old classics, and so, you know, you could, you could, which kind of, I wouldn't necessarily be upset about that I mean, that might not be a bad thing, to kind of encourage a bit more variety, you could also say for example, female texts, or LGBT texts, you know, say there must be a range of texts, a range of experiences.

This 'middle-ground' approach, where some broad areas which must be covered are specified, with teacher autonomy to select content appropriate to their context within those areas, would possibly allow students to experience "both affirmation and dissonance" (McPhail, 2013, p. 18). A student's unique personhood could still be catered for, while they are simultaneously exposed to content which takes them beyond their frame of reference, whether this be by way of exposure to new ideas and perspectives, or to important literary concepts and works. Although this is not the space for a comprehensive overview of what such a curriculum and/or assessment system could look like (indeed, this could easily be a project of its own), one could imagine the things such as the following being covered, building on Judith's list:

- Texts must expose students to a variety of time periods
- Texts must expose students to New Zealand literature, including Māori literature
- Texts must expose students to some canonical literature
- Texts must expose students to a diverse range of voices
- Texts must expose students over X number of years to key literary concepts, such as key genres, key structural devices, and key literary terminology

The current national Australian curriculum document has these kinds of statements, and could be a useful model for New Zealand to draw on. For example, see the following selection of just some of the prescriptions for Y10 students:

- identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text
- Analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of a wide range of sentence and clause structures as authors design and craft texts
- The range of literary texts for Foundation to Year 10 comprises Australian literature, including the oral narrative traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as well as the contemporary literature of these two cultural groups, and classic and contemporary world literature, including texts from and about Asia. (ACARA, 2015)

This thesis does not claim that these Australian prescriptions are perfect. However, one can see from just these three examples that this curriculum document is ensuring students are exposed to significant abstract literary concepts (e.g. analogy and satire) and perspectives (e.g. Aboriginal and Asian texts). A New Zealand model could work similarly, or could leave the curriculum as is, but develop assessments which were no longer decontextualised but instead specified particular text types or literary concepts which had to be dealt with.

Ultimately, any reforms along the lines of options one, two or three would have to be carefully thought through, and draw on the expertise of academics, teachers and students themselves, among other parties. It may be that some combination of these options might be needed to work, or that a fourth option not outlined here is required. What is clear from this thesis, however, is that the status quo is not working. At present, an extremely flexible curriculum and assessment structure paradoxically does not lead to an expansion of options for students. Rather, it far too often limits them.

Conclusion

This study ultimately presents little more than a suggestive sketch of the current state of text selection, and more broadly, content selection, within a high-autonomy environment such as that offered by the NZC and NCEA. Its limitations are obvious and many. In taking a small, non-random, purposive sample, it cannot make generalisations about how teachers in New Zealand make curricular decisions. There are also very few of the typical methods used to enhance validity (often figured as 'trustworthiness' in qualitative research) present. The data is not triangulated due to the limited size and time frame available for the study, there were not multiple investigators due to the limitations of the masters thesis format, and other techniques such as negative-case sampling and the use of multiple methods were not present (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). As such, the material and conclusions presented here should be viewed with a sceptical eye.

Nevertheless, the picture presented here should still give pause for thought, especially given how limited the literature on text selection practices, and content selection practices more broadly, currently is, especially in New Zealand. This research suggests that when teachers are given almost complete autonomy over text selection decisions, they often make decisions which take account of short term goals, such as engaging students and getting good results, rather than long term goals related to the development of the student and their "powers and dispositions" (Deng, 2018, p. 380). To say this is not necessarily to blame teachers. In fact, many teachers in this study were actively aware of this dynamic, yet felt powerless to stand in its way, as there was nothing in the system that rewarded them exploring texts with challenging language or context barriers which needed hard work and lots of support to overcome. As a result, the moments when teachers were thinking hard, and thinking systematically, about what literature it might be useful or powerful for students to encounter, rather than just thinking about what might lead to some learning in the moment, were rare. Sally's use of Ibsen's *The Doll's House* to support her Year 13's understanding of gender roles in literature, and Ros's use of *Animal Farm* to develop her students' understanding of important literary genres, stand out as relatively isolated examples. One could see a positive in that low decile students did not appear to be more likely to miss out on powerful content than high decile students, though this would be a silver lining in a less than rosy overall picture.

It is clear, however, that much more research is needed to ascertain exactly why things are the way they are, and what can be done about them. Naturally, dealing with some of the aforementioned limitations of this study would be a good starting point, though conducting a much

more comprehensive study with a random sample and triangulated data, among other things, so that we are able to develop a much more robust picture of where things are currently at. Beyond this, there are a wide variety of avenues for future work. This study was not able, for example, to spend time enquiring into the origins of teachers' decision-making schema, and instead simply described the basis on which teachers were making decisions in a rather thin way. For example, future work could look at how teachers' knowledge of literature shapes their decision making (Yates et al., 2019, are beginning to do some of this work), or investigate how teachers have come to hold core constructivist beliefs such as the idea that a student must be personally invested in particular content at the outset in order to learn something from it. There is also a need to look not just at how teachers make decisions about what to teach, but how they go about teaching it. As discussed in the introduction with reference to Grossman (1989), the actual teaching of a text, or any content, has a significant impact on how it is received by students. There is also a need for more theoretical work to inform *how* we assess teacher decision making and curriculum design. This study has sought to make a substantial contribution in this area, through the development of a modified social realist position which is more attuned to the nature of humanities subjects, and subject English in particular, but it is clear that work is still needed in this area. Robust theoretical models are necessary, because without them, we have little on which to base our judgements about what should or should not be taught.

The world is clearly moving towards seeing the New Curriculum model as the new status quo. A plethora of countries are building more and more autonomy into their curricular and assessment structures (Ers, Kalmus, Autio, 2016; Min, 2019), Wales being perhaps the latest case where, by 2022, a new curriculum focused on "the centrality of the learner, active forms of pedagogy... and a view of teachers as facilitators of learning" (Sinnema, Nieveen & Priestley, 2020, p. 2) will be in place. If this thesis suggests anything, it is that we must be confident in exercising more caution about these developments. As has been discussed, expressing concerns about the New Curriculum does not necessitate an advocacy for a curriculum which is entirely centrally prescribed. However, it does mean drawing attention to the ways in which giving complete autonomy to teachers to individually design curricula from the ground up is in some senses an "extreme position" (Smith, 2019, p. 441), whose long term effects remain relatively unknown, and hard to quantify. This is because autonomy is rarely simple: when one force acting on teachers, in this case, a prescriptive curriculum, is removed, others will swoop in, whether they be school principals demanding ever higher pass rates, or children naturally demanding material which they think will be fun and engaging. Such forces represent others forms of control over a teacher and over curriculum: it is not the case that by removing content from the official curriculum

document, teachers are able to operate in a vacuum. It is therefore the case that a more accurate assessment of all of the forces involved in positioning teachers as curriculum makers needs to be in the minds of policy makers moving forward, if we are to ensure that all students receive the education they deserve.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Promotional Post

Kia ora tātou English teachers,

I'm a Wellington-based English teacher who's currently doing his master's degree, and I really need your help with my data collection!

I'm looking at how and why English teachers choose texts for their classes, and in particular, I'm really interested in understanding how you all think about text choice and use in relation to what the NZC says, and what NCEA does/doesn't make possible.

What I really need right now are **people who would be keen to be interviewed**. I'd come to your school or talk online at a time that suits you and the interview wouldn't take longer than an hour. I'm very interested in what you have to say!

If you can help me out, that would be much appreciated. Please just email me if you might be keen and I'll discuss the finer details. Please also find attached the official 'participant information sheet' from the university which has some additional official information.

Can't wait to hear from some of you and begin to gather up your (very valuable) thoughts!

Ngā mihi,

Taylor Hughson

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Texts in Today's English Classroom: Teacher's Views

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

You are invited to take part in this research. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

Who am I?

My name is Taylor Hughson and I am a Wellington-based English teacher who is also completing his Master's degree in Education at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is work towards my thesis.

What is the aim of the project?

This project aims to understand how English teachers think about the roles texts play in their English classroom, and how they should be taught. I am particularly interested in how the New Zealand curriculum and NCEA effect how English teachers think about the kinds of texts they teach, why they teach them and how they go about doing so. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee (Application #0000027585).

How can you help?

I would be grateful if you could volunteer your time to participate in an interview. I am looking to interview people about how they think about the texts they choose and how they teach them. Interviews would last approximately one hour and will take place at your school at a time convenient to you. I will create an audio recording of the interview with your permission and transcribe this following our meeting.

It must be noted that you can choose to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason.

What will happen to the information you give?

Data gathered from the interviews will be confidential. This means that the researcher (i.e. myself) and my supervisor will be aware of your identity but the research data gathered from all of my interviews will be combined and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation. I will use pseudonyms for you and your school in the final report.

Only my supervisor and I will read the transcript of the interview. The interview recordings, and transcripts will be kept securely and destroyed on 1/09/2020.

You should also note that you can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before 25/10/2019. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

What will the project produce?

The information from my research will be used in my Master's thesis and potentially also in reports to academic conferences and in an academic journal article.

If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?

You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- choose not to answer any question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during an interview;
- withdraw from the study before 25/10/2019;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- receive a copy of your interview recording and comment on it;
- receive a copy of your interview transcript and comment on it;
- be able to read any reports of this research by emailing the researcher to request a copy.

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either my supervisor or me:

Student:

Name: Taylor Hughson

Email Address: XXX

Supervisor:

Name: XXX

Details: XXX

Human Ethics Committee information

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convenor: XXX

Signature of participant: _____

Name of participant: _____

Date: _____

Contact details: _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

- 1.) Talk to me about how you go about making text selection decisions.

- 2.) Can you tell me about a written text you've recently chosen to teach, and why you chose to teach it?

- 3.) Can you talk to me specifically about text selection in the senior school: is it at all different to the junior school, or is it just the same?

Note: As these were semi-structured interviews, a decision was ultimately made to keep the initial questions simple and open-ended, so as not to pre-dispose participants to addressing particular factors in their decision making. Once participants had begun answering, as part of the conversation the interviewer (myself) often directed the conversation to various influences (NCEA, the NZC, school culture etc.) that the participant had either raised, alluded to, or sometimes seemed to skirt around.